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Research Paper

The socially distant servicescape: An investigation of consumer preference’s during the re-opening phase

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ABSTRACT

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic restaurant operators had to close their dining rooms for dine-in service for a number of weeks; however, once they were allowed to re-open concern still existed over safety and socially distancing many operators had to get creative in ensuring guest and worker safety. The current study sought to assess consumer perceptions and preferences regarding different types of dining room setups that were implemented by restaurants around the U.S. during the re-opening phase to ensure proper social distancing amongst guests. A quasi-experimental design was implemented where respondents were shown images of two different dining-room setups and provided responses to questions based on their perceptions and preferences for these socially distant servicescapes. Overall, respondents indicated that partitions between tables were preferred to mannequins being placed at tables. Academic and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic restaurant operators across the globe have faced a number of challenges to start the year 2020. In the U. S., by mid-March some states and cities had begun requiring dining rooms to stop dine-in service causing major losses in revenue and requiring many owners and managers to begin laying off employees. The National Restaurant Association estimates that roughly 8 million restaurant employees had been laid off from mid-March to mid-April (Grindy, 2020a). However, in the U.S. toward the end of May 2020 all states that had implemented stay-at-home orders started the process of reopening. This also meant that restaurants were able to start allowing guests back into the dining room for dine-in service, albeit in limited numbers and with specific safety and social distancing guidelines in effect, most notably maintaining a distance of six feet from other guests not in their party. Although restaurant sales did begin to increase after the month of April, overall sales from March to June 2020 were down approximately $116 billion from expected levels (Grindy, 2020b).

For restaurateurs the ability to re-open for dine-in service was a welcome change from the first few months of the year; however, as concerns still existed over safety and socially distancing many operators had to get creative in ensuring guest and worker safety. Of these changes there was a need for restaurant operators to purchase more gloves than normal as front of house employees as well as back of house employees would have to wear them, similarly all employees would need to be wearing masks. Some restaurant operators suggested that these additional protective equipment costs would add about $200 a month to their expenses (Houck, 2020). Furthermore, given new dining-room capacity limitations that have been implemented across the country restaurant operators have come up with creative ways to ensure social distancing including the use of mannequins or dolls to fill up seats at unused tables, installing plastic or glass shields between tables, utilizing to-go boxes or other lightweight materials to create barriers between tables, and simply removing tables altogether. Although removing tables or blocking them off with materials that were already in-house would not add costs, purchasing barriers or other materials to fill up seats would be added expenses. Although such added expenses seem reasonable to ensure the safety of employees and guests, with capacity already limited these added expenses become even harder to recoup. Additionally, any of the measures taken to ensure proper social distancing between guests could also influence the overall dining experience in different ways. Restaurant operators in effective were experimenting with their dining rooms and modifying the atmosphere and overall servicescape without any certainty that guests would respond positively.

Research on the importance of the atmosphere and servicescape in restaurants is abundant and has shown that consumer perceptions and behaviors are influenced by the servicescape (Bitner, 1992; Han and Ryu, 2009; Hanks et al., 2017). More specifically, past studies have shown that individuals who are more satisfied with a restaurant’s
servicescape are more likely to revisit, spend more money and develop loyalty toward the restaurant (Jin et al., 2015; Kincaid et al., 2009; Ryu and Han, 2011; Taylor and DiPietro, 2017). Research has also suggested that consumers from different age groups tend to differ in their preferences for and perceptions of various aspects of the restaurant servicescape (Taylor and DiPietro, 2017).

Yet, as restaurants re-opened and made changes to their dining rooms it was not clear how consumers of any age would react or what would make them feel comfortable dining-in again. This uncertainty grew as conflicting reports of who was at risk of severe illness due to COVID-19 began to surface. Early reports suggested that older individuals had a greater risk for severe illness due to COVID-19; however, as the number of cases increased reports of younger, and seemingly healthy individuals dying from the disease started to come out. Similarly, as reports of both older and younger individuals catching COVID-19 came out, so too did reports of older and younger individuals not taking social distancing and health precautions seriously (Birch, 2020).

As such, the current study seeks to assess how individuals’ perceptions of these new socially distant servicescapes influence their feelings of safety and overall likelihood of dining in at a restaurant with a socially distant dining room. The study also seeks to understand if there are any perception or preference differences for these socially distant servicescapes between older and younger consumers. By addressing these concerns, the current study hopes to better inform industry practitioners of how to safely conduct dine-in service moving forward, as well as provide a better understanding of how consumers’ perceptions of the socially distant servicescapes influence their likelihood of dining in. Thus, the current study utilized a quasi-experimental design where respondents were shown images of two different dining-room setups and provided responses to questions based on their perceptions and preferences for these socially distant servicescapes to assess the research questions below.

RQ1: Do consumers prefer to visit a restaurant using (a) partitions between tables or (b) mannequins at tables to ensure proper social distancing between guests?

RQ2: To what extent do consumers safety and comfort concerns influence their dine-in likelihood?

RQ3: Are there significant perception or preference differences for the two socially distant dining-room scenarios between younger and older consumers?

2. Literature review

2.1. Servicescape

As previously mentioned, research on restaurant servicescapes is abundant and has repeated shown that guests’ perceptions and behaviors are influenced by the servicescape (Bitner, 1992; Hanks et al., 2017). Bitner’s (1992) seminal work on servicescapes suggested that there were three main environmental dimensions: ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Ambient conditions refer to the intangible characteristics of the servicescape including temperature, noise, air quality, lighting, etc. (Bitner, 1992; Ellen and Zhang, 2014). Spatial layout and functionality refer to how the furniture and equipment in the servicescape are arranged, the size and shape of the items and the ability of those items to facilitate service goals (Bitner, 1992). Signs, symbols, and artifacts relate to the design both inside and outside of the restaurant, the décor, material quality, and signage (Bitner, 1992).

Each of these aspects of the servicescape have been found to have a direct influence over guest perceptions (Taylor and DiPietro, 2017; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994), attitudes and behaviors (Ellen and Zhang, 2014; Han and Ryu, 2009) toward the restaurant. However, researchers have also noted that Bitner’s (1992) three dimensions are not entirely inclusive of the aspects of the servicescape, as such there have been myriad studies assessing various other aspects of the servicescape.

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic there are a few very specific aspects that other researchers have assessed within the servicescape and those are cleanliness (Barber and Scarcelli, 2010; Barber et al., 2011), and the social servicescape (Line et al., 2018) in particular how the social servicescape and physical servicescape intersect with regard to density (Hanks et al., 2017).

2.2. Cleanliness

Cleanliness has long been considered an important aspect of the overall restaurant experience (Barber and Scarcelli, 2010) and consumers’ perceptions of restaurant cleanliness has been shown to be a key determinant in service quality, satisfaction and repeat patronage intentions (Barber and Scarcelli, 2009; Barber et al., 2011; Bienstock et al., 2003; Jang and Liu, 2009). A 2008 Center for Science in the Public Interest report indicated that the top five areas of concern for restaurant guests with regard to cleanliness were: (1) employee cleanliness and hygiene, (2) rodents/insects, (3) improper use of wiping cloths, (4) presence of ill restaurant employees, and (5) bare hand contact with raw food (Klein et al., 2008). However, in times of global health pandemics like the COVID-19 pandemic cleanliness and sanitation become even more important to consumers (Gosling et al., 2020).

In March of 2020, restaurants across the U.S. had to close their dining rooms due to local and state-wide restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Petre, 2020b). However, by the end of April a number of cities and states had begun to allow restaurants to re-open their dining rooms (Fantozzi, 2020). The end of April and beginning of May saw a number of restaurant operators scrambling to implement new cleaning and sanitization policies to ensure guest and staff safety while also attempting to draw guests back in. Along with new cleaning and sanitizing policies restaurants developed new procedures and even made modifications to their servicescapes to encourage social distancing and provide ‘safer’ dining rooms. Though dining rooms were re-opening and restaurant operators were implementing new safety and cleaning procedures early reports suggested that most consumers (over 50%) were not willing to dine-in at a restaurant immediately after re-openings began (Gursory et al., 2020).

Some policies that were undertaken by restaurant operations, included requiring guests to wear masks upon entry and when not eating or drinking, requiring staff to wear masks and gloves at all times, increasing the frequency at which staff were required to wash their hands, providing additional hand sanitizer to guests, and an increased use of disposable single-use cups, utensils and menus. With regard to the servicescape some restaurant operators removed or blocked off tables and seats, put up partitions between tables and counter-service areas, and even placed mannequins or dolls in seats to further ensure proper social distancing (Petre, 2020a). Each of these policies and changes were found to be amongst the most important safety precautions customers expected of restaurants as they re-opened per a report by Gursory et al. (2020). Their report suggested that the following precautions were the most important to restaurant customers, visible sanitizing efforts, implementing social distancing, limiting the number of customers served, more frequent and rigorous cleaning of high-touch areas, and employee training of health and safety protocols (Gursory et al., 2020).

The specific changes to the physical servicescape and in particular the use of partitions and mannequins within the dining room are of particular interest as they directly relate to how individuals might perceive the social servicescape as well as the overall density of the space.

2.3. Social servicescape and density

The social servicescape relates directly to the other individuals within a given consumption environment (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) and has been shown to significantly influence consumer behaviors (Line et al., 2018). Density in the traditional physical servicescape (i.e., built density) refers directly to Bitner’s (1992) dimension of spatial...
layout and functionality. With regard to the social servicescape density refers to the number of other individuals within the consumption environment (i.e., human density) (Hanks et al., 2017). Restaurant operations tend to be densely populated consumption environments (Kim et al., 2009); however, as restaurants began their re-openings in 2020 social distancing was a key concern of both operators and consumers. As such, the use of partitions and mannequins as mentioned previously became common place, thus decreasing the overall human density while simultaneously increasing the built density.

Interestingly, some restaurant operators have indicated that the reason they decided to use mannequins or dolls in their restaurants was to help dining rooms appear full (Petre, 2020a); thus, it’s unclear if consumers will perceive this as adding to the built or human density level. Previous research has suggested that density both human and built can influence consumers’ perceptions, attitudes and behaviors (Hanks et al., 2017). Relatedly, past research has indicated that older consumers tend to place an increased level of importance on comfort and prefer increased distance between tables than do younger consumers (Lynn, 2009; Reynolds and Hwang, 2006; Robson et al., 2011). However, it is not clear how any of the changes that restaurant operators have made to the servicescape will be perceived by consumers of any age. Thus, this study further aims to assess any potential differences in perceptions and preferences between older and younger consumers. The following section outlines the research methodology.

3. Theoretical framework

The current study draws on the previous work of Bagozzi (1992) regarding attitude theory and the cognitive – affective – behavioral process. According to Bagozzi (1992) individuals first go through an appraisal process wherein they assess a specific situation, this triggers an emotional response which subsequently influences their behavioral intentions and eventual behaviors. Furthermore, Bagozzi (1992) introduced and defined the concept of outcome-desire units. Here, outcomes are defined as events that happen to an individual, that the individual produces, or that the individual can attempt to influence in the future. Desires are defined as conative states (i.e., impulses or tendencies) directed toward approach or avoidance, in this sense, a desire is tied to an approach or avoidance choice or intention. As such, outcome-desire units represent categories of appraisals that have some kind of personal significance. Bagozzi (1992) also indicates that there are two classes of outcome-desire units, (1) appraisals of planned or unplanned outcomes in the past or present and (2) appraisals of planned outcomes, each consisting of two subcategories. However, the current study focuses only on the second class – appraisals of planned outcomes, which will be further detailed below.

Within the appraisals of planned outcomes class, the subcategories of outcome-desire avoidance and outcome-desire pursuit, are entirely pertinent (Bagozzi, 1992). Outcome-desire avoidance refers to outcomes that one expects to be unpleasant; as such, emotional responses could include fear or worry, and the subsequent intentions or behaviors would be aimed at avoiding the undesirable outcomes. On the other hand, outcome-desire pursuit refers to outcomes that one expects to be enjoyable. Here the emotional response could be hope and subsequent intentions or behaviors would be aimed at ensuring that outcome occurs. According to Bagozzi (1992) individuals move through the cognitive – affective – behavioral framework in a sequential manner, where the affective responses are due to the cognitive foc i and the behavioral response is due to the specific emotion that is elicited. This suggests however, that the cognitive aspect does not have a direct influence over the behavioral response but rather only an indirect influence via the affective response. Fig. 1 below provides a graphical depiction of how the variables of interest in the current study would look given Bagozzi’s (1992) framework.

Although, this framework intuitively makes sense, the current study posits that this may not necessarily be the most accurate depiction of how individuals move through the cognitive – affective – behavioral framework. More specifically, the current study suggests that this process is not necessarily perfectly sequential and that the cognitive aspect may have both a direct and indirect influence over the behavioral response. Thus, the relationships between the three aspects of the cognitive – affective – behavioral framework would look more like a simple mediation model as shown in Fig. 2 below, which provides a graphical depiction of the current study’s theoretical framework and proposed relationships.

4. Method

4.1. Sampling

Consumer perceptions and preferences for different socially distant dining room setups that have recently been implemented by restaurants across the U.S. and globally were tested using data collected from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk was utilized purposefully as it has been identified as a good resource for diverse samples that are relatively representative of consumer demographics in the U.S. (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Mason and Suri, 2011). Furthermore, given the specific time constraints of the current study MTurk proved effective in obtaining an acceptable sample size in a short period of time. Participants were offered $0.50 to complete the survey, which was deposited into their MTurk account.

4.2. Measurement and dining-room scenarios

The online survey for the current study utilized a quasi-experimental design to assess respondent perceptions of two socially distant restaurant servicescapes and their likelihood of visiting a restaurant with a similar setup. As such, individuals who agreed to participate were first asked a series of questions regarding their typical dining out and delivery/takeout behaviors prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during the stay-at-home orders and in the few weeks after the stay-at-home orders were lifted in the U.S. After responding to those questions, they were shown two images. The first image was of a restaurant dining room that had glass partitions put up in-between tables. The second image was of a restaurant dining room that had placed mannequins at various tables. These two specific scenarios were chosen as various industry articles and television news stories had been disseminated discussing the popularity of using some form of partitions or mannequins/dolls to ensure proper social distancing between guests at restaurants around the world (Petre, 2020a). The images that were chosen represented mid-level, full-service

![C-A-B Framework](image-url)

Fig. 1. C-A-B Framework.

*Note: SDS = Socially Distant Servicescape.*
restaurants which are characteristic of operations that most consumers could be expected to have experience with. It should be noted that both images were of two different full-service operations and the images showed multiple guests seated at tables along with a server who was wearing both gloves and a face mask. Prior to testing the images were reviewed by multiple academic researchers as well as restaurant managers to ensure that the two dining rooms pictured appeared to be similar aesthetically and that the individuals pictured appeared to be similar demographically. All reviewers agreed that the images showed two similar dining room scenarios and no changes needed to be made.

After looking at the first and second images respectively respondents were presented with seven survey items regarding their perception of the dining room pictured. These items focused on the aesthetics, comfort, safety and cleanliness of the dining room (i.e., the restaurant pictured above has a visually attractive dining room, the restaurant pictured above has a safe dining room, the restaurant pictured above has a comfortable dining room) (Barber and Scarcelli, 2010; DiPietro et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2013). Next respondents were presented with two survey items assessing how comfortable and safe they would feel eating in the dining room pictured. This was followed by two items assessing respondents’ willingness and likelihood to dine-in at the dining room pictured. All survey items were adapted from previous studies and followed the same 7-point likert type scale (1: strongly disagree, 7: strongly agree).

Following the two dining room scenarios and questions respondents were presented a series of questions assessing their concerns regarding COVID-19 (five items) and their own social distancing behaviors in the weeks after the stay-at-home orders were lifted where they live (sixteen items). The final section of the survey included six basic demographic questions. The survey also included two separate attention checks.

5. Results

5.1. Profile of respondents

After removing 18 responses that had either failed one of the two attention checks or did not fully complete the survey, a total of 324 responses were recorded for data analysis. Based on the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) of 10–15 respondents per measurement item, the 324 responses were more than sufficient. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the sample. As seen in the table, the sample was predominantly Caucasian (65.4%), contained more males (62.0%) than females (38.0%), and the majority of respondents were under 40 years of age (64.8%). In terms of income, 88.5% of respondents indicated an average household income under $100,000. Finally, the sample was also well educated as 77.5% of respondents indicated having earned an undergraduate or graduate degree.

In order to get obtain a full understanding of respondents’ typical dining out behaviors they were asked a series of questions regarding their frequency of dining-in at a restaurant, ordering takeout/delivery, and average spend when doing either prior to COVID-19, during the stay-at-home order, and after the stay-at-home order was lifted across the U.S. Results suggested that most respondents regularly dined-in or ordered takeout/delivery and spent a moderate amount on both during all three time periods. Table 2 below provides a detailed breakdown of respondents dining out behaviors.

In order to determine respondents’ general concerns toward and experience with COVID-19 the survey also included items that asked respondents’ level of concern with catching the virus themselves, concern for a family member catching the virus, thoughts on the timing of their local businesses re-opening, knowledge of anyone who experienced COVID-19 related symptoms or worse, and their own social distancing behaviors after the stay-at-home order was lifted where they live. Table 3 provides a detailed description of respondents concerns and experiences with COVID-19.

| Variable                  | n  | %   |
|---------------------------|----|-----|
| Gender                    |    |     |
| Male                      | 201| 62.0|
| Female                    | 123| 38.0|
| Ethnicity                 |    |     |
| African American          | 32 | 9.9 |
| Asian                     | 14 | 4.3 |
| Caucasian                 | 212| 65.4|
| Hispanic                  | 46 | 14.2|
| Native American           | 13 | 4.0 |
| Other/Multiracial         | 7  | 2.2 |
| Age                       |    |     |
| Under 40                  | 210| 64.8|
| 40 or Over                | 114| 35.2|
| Income                    |    |     |
| Less than $25,000         | 38 | 11.7|
| $25,000-$39,999           | 61 | 18.8|
| $40,000-$69,999           | 127| 39.2|
| $70,000-$99,999           | 61 | 18.8|
| $100,000-$129,999         | 18 | 5.6 |
| $130,000-$149,999         | 15 | 4.6 |
| $150,000 or More          | 4  | 1.2 |
| Education                 |    |     |
| High School or Equivalent | 20 | 6.2 |
| Some College              | 33 | 10.2|
| 2 Year Degree             | 20 | 6.2 |
| 4 Year Degree             | 217| 67.0|
| Graduate or Professional Degree | 34 | 10.5 |
Table 2
Respondent dining-out profile.

| Variable                                      | n   | %   |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Dine-In Frequency Pre-COVID-19                |     |     |
| Less than once monthly                        | 50  | 15.4|
| 1-3 times a month                             | 99  | 30.6|
| Once a week                                   | 75  | 23.1|
| 2-3 times a week                              | 19  | 5.9 |
| 4-6 times a week                              | 7   | 2.2 |
| 7 or more times a week                        | 74  | 22.8|
| Average Dine-In Spend Pre-COVID-19           |     |     |
| Less than $10                                 | 23  | 7.1 |
| $10-$20                                      | 64  | 19.8|
| $21-$30                                      | 117 | 36.1|
| $31-$40                                      | 48  | 14.8|
| $41-$50                                      | 41  | 12.7|
| More than $50                                 | 31  | 9.6 |
| Takeout/Delivery Frequency Pre-COVID-19      |     |     |
| Less than once a week                         | 70  | 21.6|
| Once a week                                   | 120 | 37.0|
| 2-3 times a week                              | 100 | 30.9|
| 4-6 times a week                              | 26  | 8.0 |
| 7 or more times a week                        | 8   | 2.5 |
| Average Takeout/Delivery Spend Pre-COVID-19  |     |     |
| Less than $10                                 | 30  | 9.3 |
| $10-$20                                      | 95  | 29.3|
| $21-$30                                      | 100 | 30.9|
| $31-$40                                      | 64  | 19.8|
| $41-$50                                      | 23  | 7.1 |
| More than $50                                 | 12  | 3.7 |
| Takeout/Delivery Frequency During-COVID-19   |     |     |
| Less than once a week                         | 56  | 17.3|
| Once a week                                   | 81  | 25.0|
| 2-3 times a week                              | 99  | 30.6|
| 4-6 times a week                              | 36  | 11.1|
| 7 or more times a week                        | 8   | 2.5 |
| Didn’t order takeout/delivery                 | 44  | 13.6|
| Average Takeout/Delivery Spend During-COVID-19|     |     |
| Less than $10                                 | 26  | 8.0 |
| $10-$20                                      | 63  | 19.4|
| $21-$30                                      | 86  | 26.5|
| $31-$40                                      | 62  | 19.1|
| $41-$50                                      | 29  | 9.0 |
| More than $50                                 | 10  | 3.1 |
| Didn’t order takeout/delivery                 | 48  | 14.8|
| Have dined-in after stay-at-home order was lifted |  |    |
| Yes                                          | 165 | 50.9|
| No                                           | 159 | 49.1|
| Dine-In Frequency Post stay-at-home order*    |     |     |
| Once a week or less                           | 43  | 26.1|
| 2-3 times a week                              | 83  | 50.3|
| 4-6 times a week                              | 34  | 20.6|
| 7 or more times a week                        | 5   | 3.0 |
| Average Dine-In Spend Post stay-at-home order*|     |     |
| Less than $10                                 | 16  | 9.7 |
| $10-$20                                      | 39  | 23.6|
| $21-$30                                      | 57  | 34.5|
| $31-$40                                      | 35  | 21.2|
| $41-$50                                      | 12  | 7.3 |
| More than $50                                 | 6   | 3.6 |
| Takeout/Delivery Frequency Post stay-at-home order |     |     |
| Once a week or less                           | 75  | 23.1|
| 2-3 times a week                              | 113 | 34.9|
| 4-6 times a week                              | 64  | 19.8|
| 7 or more times a week                        | 20  | 6.2 |
| Didn’t order takeout/delivery                 | 52  | 16.0|
| Average Takeout/Delivery Spend Post stay-at-home order |     |     |
| Less than $10                                 | 23  | 7.1 |
| $10-$20                                      | 67  | 20.7|
| $21-$30                                      | 99  | 30.6|
| $31-$40                                      | 49  | 15.1|
| $41-$50                                      | 21  | 6.5 |
| More than $50                                 | 11  | 3.4 |
| Didn’t order takeout/delivery                 | 59  | 16.7|

Note: *Only respondents who answered ‘Yes’ to have you dined-in after stay-at-home order was lifted.

Table 3
Respondent COVID-19 Concerns and Experiences.

| Variable                                      | n   | %   |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Know anyone who has experienced any of the following due to COVID-19* |     |     |
| Symptoms                                      | 67  | 67  |
| Diagnosis                                     | 89  | 89  |
| Hospitalized                                  | 85  | 85  |
| Died                                          | 31  | 31  |
| N/A                                           | 155 | 47.8|
| Do you think reopening in your area happened* |     |     |
| Too early                                     | 122 | 37.7|
| At right time                                 | 178 | 54.9|
| Too late                                      | 24  | 7.4 |
| Which of the following social distancing behaviors are you engaging in now that the stay-at-home order has been lifted* |     |     |
| Continuing isolation or social distancing at home | 178 |     |
| Continuing to wear personal protective equipment when in public         | 200 |     |
| Hosting or attending small events/gatherings at home or in public (i.e., restaurants or bars) | 74 |     |
| Returning to life as normal                   | 41  |     |
| How worried are you personally contracting COVID-19 | |     |
| Worried – Very worried                        | 175 | 54.0|
| Neutral – Not at all worried                  | 149 | 46.0|
| How worried are you about a family member contracting COVID-19 | |     |
| Worried – Very worried                        | 193 | 59.6|
| Neutral – Not at all worried                  | 131 | 40.4|

Note: *Respondents were prompted to select ‘all that apply’.

5.2. Reliability analyses

Prior to assessing how respondent perceptions influenced their likelihood of dining in at either of the two dining room scenarios reliability checks were performed for the socially distant servicescape perceptions, feelings of safety and comfort, and dine-in likelihood. Cronbach’s alpha scores were calculated for the three scales for both scenarios, results showed alpha values ranging from .821 to .896. Scenario 1 perceptions α = .832, feelings α = .821, dine-in likelihood α = .835; scenario 2 perceptions α = .896, feelings α = .840, dine-in likelihood α = .879. After running the reliability analyses a paired samples t-test was run for all of the scale items for the two dining room setups to assess respondents’ overall perceptions, feelings of comfort and safety, and dine-in likelihood for the two dining rooms.

5.3. Paired samples T-Tests

Results indicated that the dining room with partitions between tables (M = 5.24, SD = 1.31) was more visually attractive than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.34, SD = 1.79), a statistically significant mean difference of .904, 95% CI [.698, 1.11], t(323) = 8.61, p < .001, d = 4.78. The dining room with partitions between tables (M = 5.45, SD = 1.19) also received higher clean ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.70, SD = 1.54), a statistically significant mean difference of .747, 95% CI [.563, .931], t(323) = 7.99, p < .001, d = .444. The dining room with partitions between tables (M = 5.30, SD = 1.33) also received higher welcoming ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.32, SD = 1.71), a statistically significant mean difference of .975, 95% CI [.653, .931], t(323) = 7.99, p < .001, d = .491. The dining room with partitions between tables (M = 5.23, SD = 1.36) also received higher sanitary ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.37, SD = 1.82), a statistically significant mean difference of .852, 95% CI [.626, 1.08], t(323) = 7.41, p < .001, d = .411. Likewise, the dining room with partitions between tables (M = 4.87, SD = 1.51) also received higher entertaining ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.55, SD = 1.70), a statistically significant mean difference of .321, 95% CI [.105, .537], t(323) = 2.93, p = .004, d = .162. The dining room with partitions between tables (M = 5.25, SD = 1.25) also received higher sanitary ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables (M = 4.95, SD = 1.70), a statistically significant mean difference of .352, 95% CI [.133, .571], t(323) = 2.39, p = .020, d = .114.
room with mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.54, SD = 1.56) \), a statistically significant mean difference of \( .716, 95\% CI \{ .511, .921 \}, t(323) = 6.88, p < .001, d = .382 \). The dining room with partitions between tables \( (M = 5.34, SD = 1.21) \) also received higher comfortable ratings than the dining room with mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.25, SD = 1.77) \), a statistically significant mean difference of \( 1.09, 95\% CI \{ .867, 1.31 \}, t(323) = 9.63, p < .001, d = .535 \).

Regarding feeling comfortable, respondents indicated that they would feel more comfortable dining in at a restaurant with partitions between tables \( (M = 5.06, SD = 1.45) \) than they were a restaurant that had mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.18, SD = 1.90) \), a statistically significant mean difference of \( .873, 95\% CI \{ .669, 1.08 \}, t(323) = 8.40, p < .001, d = .466 \). The dining room with partitions between tables \( (M = 5.04, SD = 1.49) \) also scored higher for feeling safe to dine in amongst respondents than did the dining room with mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.25, SD = 1.86) \), a statistically significant mean difference of \( .787, 95\% CI \{ .578, .996 \}, t(323) = 7.42, p < .001, d = .412 \). Respondents also indicated that they were more willing to dine in at a restaurant that had partitions between tables \( (M = 5.00, SD = 1.56) \) than they were a restaurant that had mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.20, SD = 1.92) \), statistically significant mean difference of \( 7.99, 95\% CI \{ .580, 1.02 \}, t(323) = 7.18, p < .001, d = .400 \). Likewise, respondents indicated that they would like to dine in at a restaurant that had partitions between tables \( (M = 4.90, SD = 1.57) \) than they were a restaurant that had mannequins at tables \( (M = 4.08, SD = 1.90) \), statistically significant mean difference of \( .815, 95\% CI \{ .596, 1.03 \}, t(323) = 7.34, p < .001, d = .408 \).

5.4. Perception-feeling-Likelihood mediation analyses

In order to determine the extent to which respondents’ feelings of safety and comfort influenced their dine-in likelihood based on their perceptions of the two socially distant servicescapes two separate mediation analyses were run utilizing Process Model 4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2018). Results of the first mediation analysis (dining room with partitions) indicated that the path from perceptions of socially distant servicescape to feelings of comfort and safety was positive and statistically significant, \( b = .947, s.e. = .063, p < .001 \). The direct effect from perceptions to dine-in likelihood was also positive and significant, \( b = .286, s.e. = .069, p < .001 \), indicating that respondents who perceived the dining room more favorably were more likely to dine in. Likewise, the direct effect of feelings on dine-in likelihood was also positive and significant, \( b = .692, s.e. = .047, p < .001 \), indicating that respondents who felt more comfortable and safe dining-in at a restaurant with partitions between tables were more likely to do so. There was a significant indirect effect of perceptions on dine-in likelihood through feelings of comfort and safety, \( b = .673, 95\% CI \{ .542, .795 \} \). Fig. 3 below provides a graphical depiction of the mediation results.

Results from the second mediation analysis (dining room with mannequins at tables) indicated that the path from perceptions of socially distant servicescape to feelings of comfort and safety was positive and statistically significant, \( b = 1.10, s.e. = .039, p < .001 \). The direct effect from perceptions to dine-in likelihood was also positive and significant, \( b = .493, s.e. = .064, p < .001 \), indicating that respondents who perceived the dining room more favorably were more likely to dine in. Likewise, the direct effect of feelings on dine-in likelihood was also positive and significant, \( b = .580, s.e. = .049, p < .001 \), indicating that respondents who felt more comfortable and safe dining-in at a restaurant with partitions between tables were more likely to do so. There was a significant indirect effect of perceptions on dine-in likelihood through feelings of comfort and safety, \( b = .639, 95\% CI \{ .503, .769 \} \). Fig. 4 below provides a graphical depiction of the mediation results.

5.5. Independent samples T-tests

In order to determine if respondents’ perceptions and preferences for the two dining room setups differed based on their age multiple independent samples t-tests were run. The t-tests assessed the differences across the seven perception variables and dine in likelihood scale for both scenarios. An additional analysis was run to determine how many individuals from both age groups had dined in after the stay-at-home order was lifted where they live, this was done using a crosstabs analysis.

The first set of independent samples t-tests assessed differences in perceptions and dine in likelihood between groups for the restaurant with partitions between tables. Results indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two groups for all but two of the variables tested (i.e., entertaining and sanitary). There was a statistically significant difference in visual attractiveness ratings between the two groups, with the over 40 group \( (M = 5.64, SD = .970) \) rating it higher than the under 40 group \( (M = 5.03, SD = 1.41) \); \( M = .61, 95\% CI \{ .350, .874 \}, t(304.48) = 4.60, p < .001 \). There was a statistically significant difference in cleanliness ratings between the two groups, with the over 40 group \( (M = 5.75, SD = .946) \) rating it higher than the under 40 group \( (M = 5.29, SD = 1.28) \); \( M = .47, 95\% CI \{ .223, .715 \}, t(292.44) = 3.75, p < .001 \). There was a statistically significant difference in welcoming ratings between the two groups, with the over 40 group \( (M = 5.49, SD = 1.15) \) rating it higher than the under 40 group \( (M = 5.19, SD = 1.41) \); \( M = .30, 95\% CI \{ .350, .874 \}, t(272.54) = 2.07, p = .039 \). There was a statistically significant difference in safety ratings between the two groups, with the over 40 group \( (M = 5.47, SD = 1.19) \) rating it higher than the under 40 group \( (M = 5.09, SD = 1.43) \); \( M = .38, 95\% CI \{ .075, .692 \}, t(322) = 2.44, p = .015 \). There was a statistically significant difference in comfortable ratings between the two groups, with the over 40 group \( (M = 5.61, SD = .955) \) rating it higher than the under 40 group \( (M = 5.19, SD = 1.31) \); \( M = .42, 95\% CI \{ .173, .674 \}, t(295.18) = 3.33, p < .001 \).
.001. There was a statistically significant difference in dining in likelihood between the two groups, with the over 40 group ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.16$) rating it higher than the under 40 group ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.40$); $M = .32$, 95% CI [.015, .619], $t(322) = 2.07$, $p = .039$.

The second set of independent samples t-tests assessed differences in perceptions and dine in likelihood between groups for the restaurant with mannequins at tables. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups for just one of the variables tested, clean ($p = .020$). More specifically, the over 40 group ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.45$) rated the cleanliness of the dining room higher than the under 40 group ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.57$); $M = .41$, 95% CI [.067, .766], $t(322) = 2.34$, $p = .020$.

The crosstabs analysis indicated that within the over 40 group 54 respondents had dined in at a restaurant after the stay-at-home order was lifted where they lived while 60 respondents in the over 40 age group had not. In the under 40 age group 111 respondents indicated that they had dined in at a restaurant after the stay-at-home order was lifted where they lived while 99 respondents in this group had not. As such a further independent samples t-test was run to see if there was a significant difference in dine-in likelihood between those who had dined in at a restaurant since the stay-at-home order had been lifted and those who hadn’t regarding their dining in likelihood for either of the two restaurant setups. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups for both dining room setups. For the dining room that had partitions between tables those who had recently dined in ($M = 5.25$, $SD = .950$) were more likely to visit a similar restaurant than those who had not ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.58$); $M = .52$, 95%CI [.235, .809], $t(256.73) = 3.58$, $p < .001$. Similarly for the dining room that had mannequins at tables those who had recently dined in ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.20$) were more likely to visit a similar restaurant than those who had not ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.72$); $M = 1.75$, 95%CI [1.43, 2.07], $t(282.39) = 10.59$, $p < .001$.

6. Discussion

The current study provides a number of interesting findings for both academics and practitioners. Given the extremely difficult circumstances faced by restaurant operators as they try to re-open and keep guests and staff safe, figuring out ways to provide socially distant servicescapes is likely to be a practice for months to come. As such, the current study provides an initial investigation into two specific restaurant dining room setups that have already been implemented across the U.S. In one setting restaurant operators are putting up glass partitions between tables and in the other they are placing mannequins at various tables within the dining room, both setups are being used to ensure a minimum of six feet between guests from different parties. Overall, results suggested that respondent perceptions of the dining room that utilized partitions were significantly greater than the dining room that utilized mannequins. Similarly, respondent dining in likelihood was greater for a restaurant that used partitions rather than mannequins in the dining room.

6.1. Academic implications

As previously noted, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a number of issues for restaurant operations, but one of the more difficult issues as operations start to re-open is ensuring guest and staff safety in an industry that involves numerous people being close to one another for extended periods of time. Social distancing has become a key practice in early 2020 and as restaurants begin to open their doors to dine-in service owners and managers have had to get creative in how they ensure proper social distancing between guests. Results of the current study indicate that of the two specific socially distant servicescapes that were assessed respondents are more likely to visit a restaurant that places partitions between tables rather than one that places mannequins at tables. Respondents also indicated that the partitioned dining room was more visually attractive, cleaner looking, more welcoming, safer looking, more entertaining, more sanitary and more comfortable than the dining room with mannequins.

Though the current study did not directly ask respondents why they rated the partitioned dining room higher than the dining room with mannequins there are a few possible explanations. First, could be tied to the somewhat sterile feeling that arises when looking at the images with the partitions. These physical barriers between tables appear to create individual spaces within the larger room, thus it is understandable that respondents might consider these safer, cleaner or more sanitary. It is interesting that this image was perceived as more welcoming and more entertaining, especially as seeing mannequins seated at a table is a rather odd and fairly whimsical sight. Thus, it might have been expected that this would be seen as more entertaining and potentially more welcoming. The current study did not ask respondents to directly indicate why they felt the way they did about the two dining rooms and as such that is a suggestion for future studies to consider. Similarly, future studies should further consider restaurant guest perceptions of other forms of socially distant servicescapes.

Given that there currently isn’t a finish line in sight for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers should continue to focus their attention on helping industry practitioners figure out what guests need and expect when returning to dine-in service. One specific suggestion would be to look at an expectation-performance gap with regard to various socially distant servicescapes; wherein researchers ask restaurant guests about their expectations for a specific dining room set-up and follow that with an actual assessment of their post-consumption perceptions of the dining room set-up. This could allow for better feedback on what aspects

[Diagram: Mediation Results – Mannequins Dining Room.
Note. * = $p < .001$.]

Fig. 4. Mediation Results – Mannequins Dining Room.

| Cognitive           | Affective                              | Behavioral          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------|
| SDS Perceptions     | Safe & Comfortable                      | Dine-In Likelihood  |
|                     | .110*                                  |                     |
|                     | .493* (.365)                            | .580*               |


of the socially distant servicescapes are working and what aspects aren’t working for guests as they continue to venture out and dine-in at restaurants again.

A further assessment of pre-consumption expectations and post-consumption perceptions along with feelings of comfort and safety and subsequent behaviors could provide even further expansion of the cognitive-affective-behavioral framework that was used to guide this study. As previously mentioned, the c-a-b framework suggests that individuals follow the steps in a sequential manner (Baggozzi, 1992), which effectively ignores the potential direct influence of the cognitive aspects on the ultimate behavioral responses. The current study sought to provide a better understanding of exactly how these relationships work and to assess if the process is truly sequential or if there is some level of direct influence from cognitive to behavioral. Results of both of the mediation models indicated that the affective aspects had a strong mediation effect between the cognitive aspects and the behavioral responses; however, there was still a significant direct effect in both models. As such, it is recommended that future studies utilizing the c-a-b framework consider if the sequential model (Fig. 1 above) or the mediation model (Fig. 2 above) is more fitting for their research goals. Results of the current study strongly support the initial proposition that individual’s behavioral responses are significantly and directly influenced by their affective responses; however, the results also suggest that there is still some level of significant influence coming directly from the cognitive aspects that the individual is considering.

Along with this, there is a continued need to assess differences between consumer groups as some people have been quick to return to dining in at restaurants while others are staying home and avoiding crowded spaces. As results of the current study show with half (50.9%) of all respondents indicated that they have dined in at a restaurant since the stay-at-home order was lifted in their area. Results also indicated that the split was relatively consistent between those 40 and older (47.4%) and those under 40 (52.9%). Interestingly, for all of the statistically significant differences in perceptions of the two socially distant dining rooms the older respondents indicated more favorable scores than did the younger respondents. Thus, building on the results of previous studies indicating that older and younger restaurant guests differ in their perceptions and preferences of restaurant servicescapes (Taylor and DiPietro, 2017). With regard to the partitioned dining room one potential explanation for why older respondents indicated more favorable ratings than the younger respondents could be tied to the perceived density (i.e., humanity and built) (Hanks et al., 2017). Though perceived density was not directly assessed the spacing between tables and guests in the image for the partitioned dining room appeared to be greater than the spacing between tables and guests in the image for the dining room with mannequins. As noted previously a number of past studies have indicated that older restaurant guests tend to prefer when there is more space between tables and guests than do younger restaurant guests (Lynn, 2009; Reynolds and Hwang, 2006; Robson et al., 2011).

Additionally, and perhaps unsurprisingly those who had recently dined in at a restaurant were significantly more likely to dine-in at either a restaurant with partitions or a restaurant with mannequins than those who had not recently dined in. However, looking at the mean scores for those who had not recently dined in indicates that this group appears to be on the fence about dining in at a restaurant with partitions (47.4%) and those under 40 (52.9%). Interestingly, for all of the statistically significant differences in perceptions of the two socially distant dining rooms the older respondents indicated more favorable scores than did the younger respondents. Thus, building on the results of previous studies indicating that older and younger restaurant guests differ in their perceptions and preferences of restaurant servicescapes (Taylor and DiPietro, 2017). With regard to the partitioned dining room one potential explanation for why older respondents indicated more favorable ratings than the younger respondents could be tied to the perceived density (i.e., humanity and built) (Hanks et al., 2017). Though perceived density was not directly assessed the spacing between tables and guests in the image for the partitioned dining room appeared to be greater than the spacing between tables and guests in the image for the dining room with mannequins. As noted previously a number of past studies have indicated that older restaurant guests tend to prefer when there is more space between tables and guests than do younger restaurant guests (Lynn, 2009; Reynolds and Hwang, 2006; Robson et al., 2011).

Although the current study represents the perceptions and behavioral intentions of a relatively small group of individuals, practitioners should still consider the overall findings, particularly the perceptions and preferences of partitions versus mannequins. Overall, respondents in the current study indicated that they would more likely visit a restaurant that put up partitions between tables than a restaurant that placed mannequins at tables. It will continue to be important for restaurant operators to ensure guest and staff safety as the world continues to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and if they are going to be open for dine-in operations social distancing will be a key factor. Partitions and mannequins are only two options that can aid in this, restaurant operators may also consider simply removing tables and chair or blocking them from guest use.

Restaurant owners and managers should also note that the current study did not find a statistically significant relationship between cleanliness and dining in likelihood for the two images shown although, there were statistically significant relationships between safe, sanitary and dining in likelihood. However, when looking at results of the paired samples t-tests respondents rated the cleanliness (moderate effect size), safety (moderate effect size), and sanitation (small effect size) of the partitioned dining room higher than that of the dining room with mannequins. These results suggest that it isn’t simply cleanliness or sanitation that guests are most interested in during these times when deciding whether or not to dine-in. Given the potential for serious illness or even death due to COVID-19 it is likely that a number of consumers simply aren’t willing to risk any chance. As previously noted nearly half of all respondents in this study indicated that they had not dined in at a restaurant at the time of the survey even though the stay-at-home order had been lifted across the U.S. three weeks prior to the survey taking place.

However, given the importance of dining room sales to the overall profitability and success of most restaurant operations it will be imperative for owners and managers to be creative as they welcome guests back into their now socially distant dining rooms. Therefore, restaurant operators should first re-think their cleaning and sanitation protocols, provide gloves and face masks for all employees, and decide what they will do to ensure proper social distancing amongst guests. Other things owners and managers might consider if they aren’t already in place include, requiring reservations, shortened or modified menus, modified hours to allow for additional cleaning/sanitizing of the operation between service times, or even pre-selected meals. As suggested by Gursoy et al. (2020) a large number of consumers will not be rushing back into restaurants or other food and beverage outlets, therefore it will continue to be imperative that operators do everything they can to create the safest and most enjoyable experience they can, in hopes that as things get better more guests will decide to dine-in again.

7. Limitations and conclusion

Though the findings of this study are of interest and important to the hospitality industry as a whole, the study is not without its limitations. One limitation is that the survey focused specifically on the dining rooms pictured and did not ask questions regarding the individuals (i.e., servers or guests) pictured therein. Given the recent interest in social servicescapes research future studies should further consider how the other individuals in these socially distant servicescapes influence guest perceptions and preferences. Another limitation is the use of an online survey platform, although MTurk has been found to provide rather representative respondents, surveying guests as they are actually dining in at a restaurant similar to those pictured in the survey could provide a different understanding of their perceptions and preferences. However, given the need to keep researchers, restaurant guests and restaurant workers safe the use of online data collection protocols should continue to be considered.

Results of the current study provide an initial assessment of consumer perceptions and preferences for two specific restaurant dining room scenarios that have been utilized be restaurateurs as stay-at-home
orders have been lifted across the U.S. As restaurant operators and consumers try to navigate a new normal in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing practices have become paramount and the use of partitions or mannequins in dining rooms are just two examples of how this is happening. Some other creative changes that have been made by restaurants around the world include setting up glass pods around a dining table creating a small see-through ‘room’ for diners, allowing diners to reserve parking lot spaces where they can bring their own chairs or blankets to sit at as they enjoy a meal, and using to-go boxes or other light-weight materials to create physical barriers between tables/diners. The socially distant servicescape is something that is likely to be in place for some time, and restaurant operators will have to continue to be creative as they try to keep guests and staff safe and healthy.

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