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Exploring the components of meal-sharing experiences with local foods: a netnography approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and ascertain the components of meal-sharing experiences with local foods of international travellers. This study offers insights into the factors influencing local food tourists' evaluation of destination experiences of a sharing economy platform. A netnography approach is applied to understand the meal-sharing experience and 957 online reviews are examined which were posted on Eatwith by visitors who participated in the meal-sharing economy platform in Rome (Italy) between 2013 and 2020. Findings reveal seven components of meal-sharing experiences with local foods: authenticity, social interaction, local hospitality, awe, local culture, novelty, and servicescape. Findings show that participants can interpret their meal-sharing experience in different ways. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first research that uses online reviews to explore and understand the meal-sharing experience with local foods. This study has unique theoretical contribution by exploring the components of meal-sharing experience with local foods, as well as practical implications for service providers in order to enhance their service and experience quality.

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Meal-sharing experience; local foods; authenticity; social interaction; awe; servicescape; netnography method

Introduction

Meal-sharing economy platforms are considered to be one of the most important and fastest-growing hospitality areas that attract international tourists seeking to experience local culture and authenticity (Privitera & Abushena, 2019). These platforms provide tourists with the opportunity to increase their local food knowledge by learning about new foods, the ingredients of local foods, and their cooking methods. This experience process generally occurs at hosts' home or in a restaurant that is chosen by locals, thereby creating social interaction with other guests and hosts (Zurek, 2016). Gul (2018) emphasized that these platforms enable tourists to try actual/quality foods, meet with various people, feel the sincerity, and obtain new cultural experiences. Tourists who desire a memorable and new experience try to eat local foods at home-restaurants (Mhlanga, 2020). This is the most sought-after experience of modern tourists (Maitland, 2010) because experiencing local foods through meal-sharing economy platforms is the best way to interact with the local culture of the host destination.

The meal-sharing economy enables tourists to taste genuine local foods beyond their daily eating habits and it is a platform where a meal is prepared and served by locals, and then shared with them (Zurek, 2016). These platforms also provide diverse experiential value through local food for tourists; and tourists participating through this platform gain knowledge about traditions, culture, history,

location, and ethnic aspects of the destination as well as cuisine from the lives and experiences of the locals. Meal-sharing economy platforms provide authenticity owing to the close and genuine social connection with locals that they facilitate through the consumption of local food (Veen & Dagevos, 2019). Therefore, the food sector has joined this sharing economy, which has developed quickly across the urban food market because it appeals to tourists' desire for authenticity within the overall tourism experience (Privitera & Abushena, 2019).

Existing literature investigating the meal-sharing economy has focused mainly on several issues, including guests' motivation (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Ketter, 2019; Veen & Dagevos, 2019), trust (Lee, 2019), social innovation (Dagevos & Veen, 2020), service innovation (Lee, 2019; Mack, 2018), recipe suggestions (Robert, 2020), reducing food waste (Falcone & Imbert, 2017), and the impacts on restaurant performances (Mhlanga, 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, meal-sharing platforms offering local foods have not been explored from an experiential perspective. Previous studies have neglected to explore meal-sharing experiences and to learn about the values, lifestyles, and food consumption preferences of meal-sharing users. Understanding the components and determinants of meal-sharing experiences with local foods can help service providers to improve their services.

While previous research emphasizes the growing network system of meal-sharing economy platforms (Ketter, 2019; Mhlanga, 2020), this study addresses a knowledge gap in the hospitality literature, making a valuable contribution to food tourism experience literature related to exploring the nature of the meal-sharing experience. Thus, a lack of understanding of the meal-sharing experience with local foods is a significant knowledge gap. In response, this qualitative study ascertains the components of the meal-sharing experience with local foods of international travellers visiting Rome using the netnography research approach. The study contributes to the current research agenda by bringing forward several essential theoretical insights for future research directions. The research also discusses several practical implications that can be extremely helpful for service providers to improve their service offerings.

Literature review

The meal-sharing economy

The sharing economy is mostly referred to as a 'collaborative economy', 'collaborative consumption', an 'access economy', a 'platform economy', and a 'community-based economy' (Hossain, 2020). These platforms generate micro-entrepreneurship, which contributes to a sustainable tourism approach by encouraging new economic dynamics in destinations (Guttentag, 2015) since post-modern tourists tend to spend in localities rather than in large tourism enterprises in the core tourist area of destinations (Böcker & Meelen, 2017). The sharing economy has gained significant importance in the hospitality and tourism industry with many different examples of informal economic business initiatives (e.g. accommodation, transportation, food and beverages, and destination guiding by locals) as a result of building popularity and credibility (e.g. Uber, Airbnb, EatWith, Withlocals) (Heo, 2016; Sigala, 2017). Although tourists are well-provided for in the accommodation and transportation sectors, peer-to-peer or collaborative economies for food and beverages are becoming more popular among them. The food consumption version of sharing economy platforms may be transformed into a 'meal-sharing economy', which is related to food production, distribution, and consumption aspects of a culinary destination (Ketter, 2019; Mhlanga, 2020; Sigala, 2017; Zurek, 2016). Therefore, to enhance the local food experience, the meal-sharing economy yields economic, cultural, and environmental benefits for the development of local communities (Privitera & Abushena, 2019).

People no longer inherit their secret family recipes and use them to generate income (Bessi re, 1998) within a sharing economy (Fang et al., 2016). Therefore, meal-sharing platforms within sharing economy initiatives (e.g. Eatwith, MealSharing, Withlocals, LetsLunch, BonAppetour, Yeatup) allow

tourists to participate in a private or a group dining experience in locals' homes which extensively features local foods (Privitera & Abushena, 2019; Zurek, 2016). In the same vein as previous observations, Privitera and Abushena (2019) stated that meal-sharing platforms offer cultural exchanges, a reasonable cost for food, and more encounters between hosts and guests. Gul (2018) also noted that tourists have four fundamental motives for participating in the meal-sharing economy experience, namely trying actual/quality foods, meeting people, feeling sincerity, and attaining cultural experiences. Furthermore, the author concluded that hosts use these platforms in order to encounter people from a different culture, to gain knowledge of other cultures, to start their own businesses, and to earn money. Ketter (2019) also stated that meal-sharing platforms are used by tourists because of their aspirations, achievement, and desire for self-expression.

The concept of meal-sharing economy platforms is designed to also enable tourists to shop for ingredients at local markets, to cook, and to eat with locals in their homes, accompanied by pleasant conversation for a small amount of money (Veen & Dagevos, 2019; Zurek, 2016). Moreover, these platforms provide guests to get preparation of foods, the starting point of local foods (i.e. explaining with its origin) and learn the stories of certain dishes that are destination-specific (Lee, 2019). Several studies (e.g. Bellows et al., 2010; Cranfield et al., 2012; Zepeda & Li, 2006) noted that involvement with food shopping, preparation, and cooking increases the tendency to consume local food. There are two sides on these platforms, the host and the guest. A host is 'an individual or a business who or which supplies food and drink to guests, in their own home or a non-registered venue, with the contact with the guest arranged via an online platform' and the guest is 'an individual who consumes the food and drink supplied by the host' (Hotrec, 2018, p. 6). Hosts usually welcome guests into their home and bring people from different countries together, thereby facilitating social interaction between their guests and themselves around a dining table (Zurek, 2016). In a study by Gul (2018), it has been found that host and guest create a connection and this lasts after the meal-sharing experience. This situation has been called a cross-cultural connection.

Trust has a major role in access-based service experiences such as the sharing economy (Altinay & Taheri, 2019). Meal-sharing platforms provide hosts and guests to come together in a home or restaurant that was determined by local (Hotrec, 2018). In such places, locals prepare some foods for their customers and they are seen as a stranger by guests. In this phase, the fact that both sides are stranger each other and the guest side is also stranger to foods propose an item for the trust agenda. In order to overcome this issue, service providers developed some procedures (Gul, 2018). According to Gul (2018), these platforms first ensure hosts fill an application form. Second, these platforms see the social media of hosts and service areas that are offered to guests. After ensuring mutual trust, hosts start to take guests to be offered services for a fee. This was proved in one of the biggest meal-sharing economy platforms and emphasized that they apply highly-selective application procedures (Eatwith, 2020b). Furthermore, this platform provides guests and hosts to be covered a comprehensive insurance policy (2,000,000 USD guarantee). Participants who desire to experience new foods and are curious about different experiences use such platforms for questing novelty (Ji et al., 2016) and they trust only reviews posted by other participants about hosts (Dieck et al., 2017). Ter Huurne et al. (2018) also stated that 'the probability of sharing a meal is moderated by product and profile information, which is also able to create trust' (p.14). This was consolidated by a qualitative study as such 'Reviews are very helpful, also in terms of reliability. The reviews give trust that it all goes well' (Veen, 2019, p. 7). In sum, trust in such platforms depends on reviewers' posting quality and details given about services and hosts.

In a highly competitive and rapidly developing sharing economy area, service innovation which is mainly driven by the expansion of new technology is inevitable (Gazzola, 2018). These platforms desire to adopt service innovation to increase customer value, utilize regional resources and competencies, and adopt technological tools (Drew et al., 2009). One of the novel services of sharing economy, food is so crucial for destination visitors who desire to interact with locals as well as for service providers who want to vary their services because these areas generate specific niche markets for sharing economy platforms by utilizing destinations' resources (Mhlanga, 2020). In

order to offer novel services in the meal-sharing economy platforms, service providers desire to diversify their services instead of home-diners such as food tours, food workshops, vineyard tours, etc. Furthermore, these meal-sharing platforms give importance to the adoption of innovations into their services and products. A study by Lee (2019) proposed a model to understand better service innovations of social dining in the sharing economy. According to this study, it was concluded that there some reasons for (i.e. physical environment and cultural benefits) and against (i.e. health concerns and relational barriers) adoption on the likelihood of adopting innovations. Moreover, this study highlighted that trustworthiness (i.e. ability, willingness, and reliability), status-quo and satisfaction have a vital role in the likelihood of adopting innovations. All these features play a major role in shaping service innovations into meal-sharing platforms. Another research examining service innovation of the meal-sharing economy highlighted that relative advantage (i.e. health benefits and taste), personal compatibility, and trialability of new functional foods have a significant impact on consumers' innovation adoption such as adoption intention and behaviour (Mack, 2018). In sum, consumers' perceptions toward innovations' features help to form the innovation adoption intention and behaviour.

The novelty of food is deemed as the main reason for tasting unfamiliar food for escaping from daily routine (Çanakçı & Birdir, 2020). Ji et al. (2016) noted that travellers who are curious about the novelty are more likely to try new services. In this regard, meal-sharing economy platforms provide an active venue to feel local hospitality with social interaction and to obtain knowledge about the destination with more authentic tips (Atsız et al., 2021). By doing so, it offers a novel service understanding for food-enthusiasts who pursue flavouring novel tastes outside the daily mundane and seek knowledge through culinary (Gul, 2018; Ketter, 2019). In this manner, comparing other similar innovations (e.g. Uber, Airbnb), the meal-sharing concept differentiates itself along with the aforementioned reasons. However, such food-related activities are still happening out of any official regulation (Schindler, 2015) and, safety risks and potential food-related health concerns are still ongoing discussions. Individuals only participate in these sharing transactions from the viewpoint of trust (Veen, 2019). Therefore, the trustworthiness of service providers in these social dining services plays a key role against the adoption of users to this service innovation (Lee, 2019).

Meal-sharing experience with local foods

In meal-sharing economy platforms, locals cook meals for their guests by providing knowledge about their foods' ingredients and cooking methods. Ketter (2019) noted that a meal-sharing experience is more likely to involve a novel, engaging, and sensual food experience. In addition, it is emphasized that it is more likely to link to hedonism in general food experience which may not particularly relate to the meal-sharing experience but is extremely relevant when tourists explore and enjoy the local cuisine. Similarly, Zurek (2016) also noted that dining with locals in their homes provides a unique and deeply satisfying meal-sharing experience with local food.

Many studies have already stressed that local food has a central role in the tourist experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014) because tourists seek to benefit from everything regarding the culinary culture of the destination they are visiting and to fulfil their psychological needs by consuming local foods (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Thus, local food contributes substantially to the overall travel experience of tourists in unfamiliar destinations (Okumus & Cetin, 2018) and, therefore, plays a reciprocal role in food supply and demand as tourism generates a market for authentic foods (Bessièrè, 1998; Sims, 2009). Indeed, local food-related experience in a destination has a decisive role in tourists' destination choice because local food generates anticipated culinary experiences (Henderson, 2009; Robinson & Getz, 2016).

According to Heo (2016), consumers join the sharing economy due to its benefits to the value of exchanging and being an active partner in value creation by interacting with hosts. Pine and Gilmore (1998) stated that participating in service processes forms an unforgettable memory of the experience. Sharing economy platforms allow travellers to obtain deep knowledge about destinations'

local life which generates more experiences, feelings, and impulses to interact with others (Gutten-tag, 2015). Dining with others creates a fundamental link for creating a social bond (Bessière, 1998), and gastro-tourists tend to eat in groups as well as interacting and having conversations about their food-related experiences (Fields, 2002). According to Böcker and Meelen's (2017) study findings, socializing is the most important meal-sharing experience among parties in terms of the sharing economy.

Tourists demand an experience that takes place beyond mundanity, making their experience more authentic and memorable, as they seek for genuine aspects involving meaningful interactions with locals on sharing-economy platforms (Paulauskaite et al., 2017; Sharpley & Stone, 2012). Meal-sharing platforms generate unique and more memorable food experiences by their nature with regards to their authenticity of local foods in a broad sense (Mhlanga, 2020) since the authenticity of local food has a strong relationship with a memorable food experience (Sthapit, 2017).

Tourists likewise seek authenticity, and the search for genuine aspects, involving increased meaningful interactions with locals on sharing economy platforms, makes tourism experiences memorable (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). This is significantly due to the relationship between local food and its specific destination, as well as representing a cultural aspect of the local life it exemplifies (Bessière, 1998; Holtzman, 2006), namely the way of eating with regard to how to cook, serve, and consume the local foods through tourism (Birch & Memery, 2020).

Privitera and Abushena (2019) emphasized that modern tourists use meal-sharing economy platforms to experience the authenticity of local cultures. This is relevant to the emotions that the food consumption experience provides to travellers concerning destination (Kim et al., 2009; Tsai, 2016). Meal sharing is highly relevant to encountering local food, which largely reflects features of the destination (Kim et al., 2009; Kivela & Crofts, 2009) as well as offering tourists a way to create an attachment with visiting places (Tsai, 2016; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Tourists gain a profound knowledge regarding life, culture, and the history of the destination being visited (Robinson & Getz, 2016), and perceive a sense of identification and attachment with the place (Lin & Mao, 2015; Sims, 2009). For instance, although not directly related to meal sharing, the following two studies reveal the relationship between local food and local culture. Son and Xu (2013) found that travellers visited Korea and sampled Korean Buddhist food to expand their knowledge about the Korean Buddhist tradition through experiencing Buddhist cuisine (i.e. Korean Buddhist restaurants, cooking methods, unique ingredients, and traditional Buddhist table manners). Chang and colleagues (2010) also observed that Chinese tourists visited Australia intending to gain authenticity for their travel experience through Australian food culture.

Despite the scarcity of literature on the meal-sharing economy, it is not a new concept or phenomenon. However, scholars have recently started to examine aspects of this concept such as the preferences, motivations, or the differences of hosts and guests who are using the meal-sharing economy (Gul, 2018; Ketter, 2019; Mhlanga, 2020; Privitera & Abushena, 2019). Furthermore, a situational report on the meal-sharing economy has been published by the Association of Hotels, Restaurants, Bars, and Cafés (2018). However, no studies have attempted to investigate the meal-sharing economy from an experiential perspective, and literature on the meal-sharing economy is still lacking an exploration of the components of the meal-sharing experience. Therefore, this study will be one of the first to find out which components represent the meal-sharing experience and will be extremely helpful to relevant literature in terms of the methodology used, namely the netnography method.

Research methodology

This research aims to identify the components of meal-sharing experiences with local foods utilizing reviews posted on the meal-sharing platform. To address the objective, this study adopts netnography which is known as 'ethnography on the Internet' (Kozinets, 2002) and is the best method to investigate tourist experiences and feelings shared online (Rageh et al., 2013). Kozinets (2002)

described netnography as a 'new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (p.62).

There are various reasons as to why this method has been used for this study. Firstly, it was intended to contribute to the field in terms of identifying the components of meal-sharing experiences posted in an online community (i.e. Eatwith) which may help scholars obtain an insight into the study of food experiences. Eatwith is one of the meal-sharing economy platforms with the most guests. Second, it enables us to take an organized approach to a better comprehensive understanding of meal-sharing experiences with online data. Thirdly, it is not needed to be a participant-observer in such an approach. Finally, this method is faster, easier, and less costly than conventional ethnography (Thanh & Kirova, 2018). The main methodological stages of the netnographic approach, as suggested by Kozinets (2010), were implemented: planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation.

Planning and entrée

In reference to this step, Kozinets (2010) emphasized that when researchers choose an online platform, they should consider the research purpose, active users, a notable amount of followers, and various types of members in order to offer rich data for researchers. Thus, Eatwith was selected as an online community for addressing the purpose of this study. Eatwith is the most featured and important meal-sharing economy platform; it has 25,000 hosts and 265,000 guests in 130+ countries with a very large number of reviews (Eatwith, 2020c). A wide range of feelings, perceptions, and experiences posted by participants are available on this platform. This stage complies with Kozinets' (2010) guidelines.

Data collection

Before data collection, the authors selected written or archived data and considered these reviews to meet the purpose of this research. Data collection was conducted in March 2020 from the reviews in Eatwith.com (URL: <https://www.eatwith.com>). Rome was chosen as a research area because it has a rich local food offering for tourists including pizza, pasta, gelato, and many other delicacies; its cuisine which is offered on meal-sharing economy platforms by locals is preferred by tourists who wish to experience it in locals' homes (Eatwith, 2020a). All reviews were entered using Microsoft Word. Namely, direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members was recorded. Some criteria were considered when reviews were collected. First, reviews that contained experiential aspects were chosen. Second, non-English reviews were discarded from the review pool because the authors don't know other languages such as French, Russian, etc. A total of 1,708 reviews posted between January 2013 and February 2020 on the meal-sharing platform were collected. Distribution of the reviews are shown in [Figure 1](#).

Data analysis and interpretation

In a study by Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019), they found that content analysis is one of the most applied data analysis techniques in the netnography method. In this study, conventional content analysis was used to examine the data. In the literature, conventional content analysis is identified as 'an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications' (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243). The collected data was analyzed with the help of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Kozinets, 2002), namely MAXQDA. The authors followed the guidelines for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to explore the components of meal-sharing experiences with local foods.

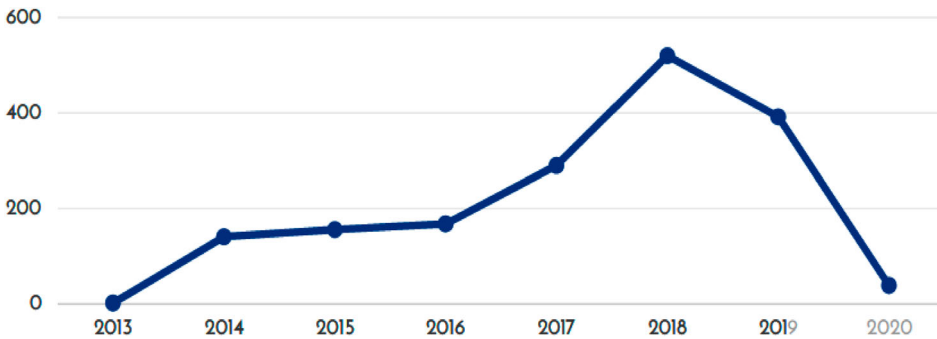


Figure 1. Distribution of all reviews.

The authors first applied an open coding procedure that enabled reviews to be coded into discrete parts. Moreover, the similarities and differences of each code were investigated and compared with each other as shown in Table 1. This process was performed as line-by-line coding. Then, axial coding was applied to reduce data into sub-themes that represented components of the meal-sharing experience. Throughout this process, components of the meal-sharing experience were described. The coding process in practice can be seen in Table 2. To integrate some parts of the data and form a conceptual framework, selective coding was adopted and seven main themes including 63 sub-indicators were identified. Theoretical saturation was achieved because the collected data ensured no additional meaningful insights emerged that could help to understand the meal-sharing experience. The final data corpus was determined by the authors as 957 reviews.

Research findings

Profiles of reviewers

Eatwith provides limited information concerning participant profiles. Therefore, the researchers accessed only two aspects of their profiles (their gender and origin), and information was determined as an overall evaluation of service. There were more females (44%) than male users (39%) and 17% of them were unspecified their gender. Participants were from four different continents;

Table 1. An illustrative example of the open coding.

Online reviews (extracted from the Withlocals)	Line-by-line coding
... A wonderful, authentic Roman experience! Cristina treated us like old friends, we learned a few things and ate great food ...	wonderful; authentic Roman experience; friendly; great;
... He was gracious, generous and knowledgeable. The guests were fun and interesting. The food was fantastic and the atmosphere was casual and not intimidating at all ...	gracious; generous; knowledgeable; funny; interesting; casual of atmosphere; fabulous; welcomed; learning new things
... My friends and I had a fabulous time at their place! We felt very welcomed and left it feeling as if we have some new friends in Rome. The food was wonderful and the wine was plentiful. Highly recommend their place if you want an authentic Roman experience with great food ...	

Table 2. The coding process in practice.

Open coding (line-by-line coding)	Axial coding	Main themes (selective coding)
... caring, respectful, comfortable, generous, hospitable, welcoming, and provided a feeling of being welcomed into the hosts' homes ...	Local hospitality of the service providers	Local hospitality that enhance the formation of meal-sharing experiences of participants.

the majority were from European countries, although the Americas, Africa, and Asia were also represented. Many participants (89%) rated the service providers with 5 points (maximum positive rating).

Components of meal-sharing experience with local foods

In this section, the themes that occurred from data analysis and profiles of reviewers are explained. The key components of meal-sharing experience drawn from data analysis are as follows: (1) authenticity, (2) social interaction, (3) local hospitality, (4) awe, (5) local culture, (6) novelty, and (7) servicescape (See [Figure 2](#)). The components were explored further by rereading the coded statements.

Authenticity

Local Roman foods and experience, authentic ingredients, original and unique foods are examples that represent the authenticity component in our study. For example, **R798** mentioned it as *'This will be one of the most memorable experiences of your time in Rome. If you are wanting an authentic experience, reserve your seats now as we were very happy we did so in advance. The food was delicious'*. Furthermore, genuine and original foods can reflect authentic foods or atmosphere. **R570** implied that her experience was *'Our hosts provided a real local experience – the food was authentic and the atmosphere was real'*.

In this study, users posted that the meal-sharing experience was authentic and had returned to the same service provider again. The authors detected that they had commented twice or more. For

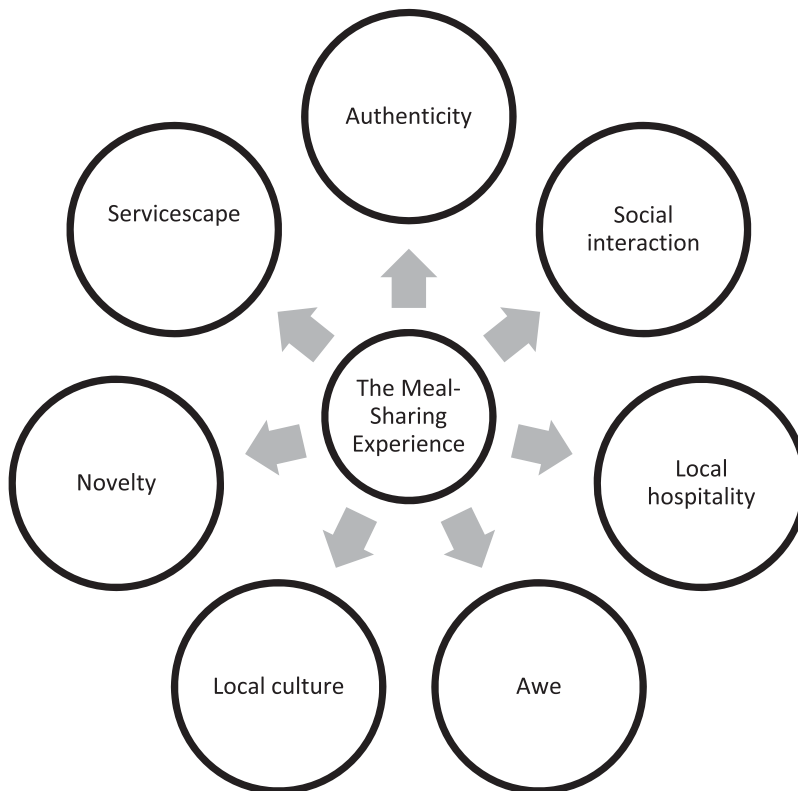


Figure 2. Components of meal-sharing experience with local foods.

instance, one of the users (**R759**) visited the same service provider again and mentioned that his/her second visitation was

This night was unforgettable! they are located in the heart of Trastevere! Their place is so beautiful and charming and their food was way above our expectations. Paolo is a professional chef with a delicate hand and Michela's special Tiramisu is the best and most unique one we had in Rome! Highly recommended!

Authenticity plays a pivotal role in the behavioural intentions of tourists. For example, it was found that authenticity influences attitudinal loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and behavioural loyalty (Castéran & Roederer, 2013). Yi et al. (2018) also indicated that it affects destination loyalty. In addition, an authentic feeling created a memorable food experience (Sthapit, 2018). For instance, **R593** mentioned that his experience was: *'They have provided us with a wonderful experience to discover Roman cuisine and culture. Next time we are in Rome, we know where to go!'* This finding supports previous research (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Yi et al., 2018). Furthermore, meal-sharing economy platforms are branded as authentic places in which tourists wish to participate (Mhlanga, 2020).

Authenticity has gained popularity among modern tourists wishing to visit a cultural destination. The quest for authentic cues pushes them to visit the destination in order to see its cultural attractions by arousing their desire to encounter these on-site (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). Seyfi et al. (2020) emphasized that the authenticity of cultural destinations impacts tourist experience, and tourists' novel and authentic perceptions of the destination represent its locality.

Ellis et al. (2018) found that authenticity is the most covered topic in food tourism research. They also showed that authenticity was the most prominent featured motivation among food tourists. Food attractions, therefore, can be seen as a significant part of the tourism experience and desirable elements for food tourists to experience a feeling of authenticity and originality in the destination (Beer, 2008). It was also emphasized that conventional food is less authentic than local food. Thus, local foods can be an important motivation for tourists in their quest for authentic cues (Autio et al., 2013).

Social interaction

In our research, social interaction is an important component of the meal-sharing experience. Participants reviewed that coming together with other tourists or hosts is a great experience for them. This created a memorable meal-sharing experience for them. Users generally described the characteristics of hosts as enthusiastic, open-minded, charming, knowledgeable, passionate, professional, sincere, funny, kind, sociable, helpful, lovely, friendly, and warm. According to Cetin and Bilgihan (2016), locals' characteristics are one of the striking factors that impact the overall cultural tourism experience. During their interaction, participants mentioned that they felt as if they were friends or members of the family in hosts' homes. It was observed that the more positive the hosts' characteristics, the more positive the social interaction and attachment.

For example, a guest (**R745**) that was determined to visit the same place again posted his initial feelings as *'the other guests were fun and contributed to making a memorable evening'* and then he recorded the same perception of his meal-sharing experience (*We had a great evening with Michela and Paolo and the other guests. They are great hosts It felt so comfortable in their beautiful apartment and the conversation was really fun and interesting*). Other participants expressed their feelings as below:

The food was good, the conversation was fun and the tips from everyone's shared experience were very helpful. (**R35**)

They are so naturally friendly and very sociable, and it was an honour to be invited into their home and share their beautiful food. (**R846**)

He is very knowledgeable about food, drink, and all things Rome. He is a gracious host. He cares of their guests. (**R100**)

In home-sharing lodgings, social interaction and knowing the hosts has a pivotal role in exploring the destination (Shi et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is essential to the successful development of tourism by creating a positive relationship between tourists and hosts (Sharpley, 2014). Furthermore, tourism is related to 'interacting with other places and other people, undergoing experiences that may influence their own or the host community's attitudes, expectations, opinions and, ultimately, lifestyles' (Sharpley, 2008, pp. 1–2). Therefore, it is inevitable tourists and hosts interact with each other. Furthermore, tourists can also interact with other tourists (Torres, 2016). This interaction is one of the pivotal components of the cultural tourism experience (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016) because a memorable cultural tourism experience can occur through this interaction (Sharpley, 2014).

Local hospitality

For many of the guests, the service providers were seen as caring, respectful, comfortable, generous, hospitable, welcoming, and provided a feeling of being welcomed into the hosts' homes. These attributes are a significant part of a memorable tourism experience (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013) because tourist attractions are not enough to create an overall tourist experience (Mill & Morrison, 1992). Lashley (2008) refers to hospitality as 'traditions, both cultural and domestic, of concern by hosts for the well-being of guests' (pp. 69–70). Lashley (2000) proposed three domains including social, private, and commercial in the context of hospitality. He emphasized that cultural or social domains are related to local hospitality. Furthermore, Lashley (2008) implied that local hospitality needs to be welcoming, generous, and respectful toward tourists resulting in tourists wishing to revisit the destination. Furthermore, Okumus and Cetin (2018) clarified the perceived attributes of local hospitality for culinary tourists as social, caring, helpful, and generous. In our study findings, participants commented on welcoming, generous, and respectful hosts as below.

They were very welcoming, and their friends and other travelers were very friendly. (R30)

He is welcoming, funny, and respectful. He has many funny stories and his Italian accent is charming. (R69)

His place felt like home, he is a consummate, generous, and a natural host who made us felt very welcome. (R57)

She welcomed us into her home, and the rest of the night we were part of the family. (R416)

In this study, participants emphasized that the characteristics of service providers represented Italian hospitality. Also, service providers have them felt as at their homes. For example, some reviewers expressed their feelings as '*they were so sweet & welcoming. You immediately felt at ease in their home*' (R416), '*fabulous experience! Not only was the food exceptional, but our hosts were gifted in the art of making everyone feel welcome and comfortable*' (R563), and '*the ambiance was so comfortable we felt like we were having dinner with the family*' (R208). According to Sthapit (2017), these attributes are extremely helpful to create memorable food experiences. With regards to meal-sharing economy platforms, social interaction attracts people to participate in these areas and revisit the destination (Zurek, 2016).

Kozak and Rimmington (1999) showed in their study that the friendliness of locals was regarded as the most positive component of the tourism destination. Moreover, modern tourists wish to interact more with locals compared to tourists in the past (Yang, 2011). Therefore, the attitudes of locals toward tourists are of great importance in terms of creating a tourism experience. In a study to explore the components of guided culinary tourists, Seyitoglu (2020), indicated that the hospitality of locals is extremely important to provide a memorable culinary experience. In particular the warmth, friendliness, and hospitality of locals encourage tourists to revisit the host destination.

Local culture

The local culture was discussed by the majority of the meal-sharing participants. As for the cultural theme, they mentioned items such as the history of Rome through eating, Roman manners (food

habits), lifestyles of hosts (Romans), recipes, cooking tips, local foods, and Italian culture. For example, one of reviewers stated that it was '*I went to Rome alone for the weekend and wanted to meet local people and discover local food habits. He and his wife allowed me to discover the heart of Roma's culture and magic!*' (R952). The majority of reviews mentioned that home-restaurants provided them with the experience of discovering Roman cuisine and culture. R76 reviewed it as '*We enjoyed 3 bottles of Pecorino wine from the region. For those who seek experiences outside the restaurant and want to connect with a local*' and R354 stated that '*They created a real Italian atmosphere, just by being themselves and by cooking a dinner which was enjoyable by anyone who was attending the evening*'.

The local culture has become a key attraction for cultural (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016) and memorable tourist experiences (Kim & Eves, 2012). Cultural attractions provide tourists with a unique and exciting experience by increasing their knowledge (du Cros & McKercher, 2020). As a cultural value, local foods can be seen as the main motivational factor for food tourists (Kivela & Crofts, 2009). Tourists not only get insight into foods but also attain knowledge about the history of the destination, the lifestyles of locals, cooking methods, and ingredients. These are all values which represent the culture of the destination, and cultural tourists seek to experience these on-site. Meal-sharing economy platforms, therefore, are the best area in terms of experiencing all of these values in one place. Richards (2018) emphasized that it these platforms are key to a specific type of consumption in cultural tourism and its popularity with modern tourists will increase in the future.

Awe

A sense of awe is one of the key components of the meal-sharing experience and participants generally mentioned it in their reviews. For the majority of the participants, the perceived sense of awe in meal-sharing economy platforms is described as extraordinary, marvellous, magnificent, astonishing, excellent, perfect, incredible, fantastic, pleasant, fabulous, amazing, outstanding, memorable/unforgettable, wonderful, and spectacular. Some guests, when describing service providers, their experience, other guests, foods, and atmosphere, posted as below.

Their home a haven in the hills. I can not say enough words to express my gratitude to all. A million graziers to all for all your hard work filled with love and special touches. (R564)

We had a marvelous time, the view from the terrace is spectacular, the food was marvelous and she is a phenomenal host. (R908)

It's impossible to imagine a more beautiful and joyful dinner. The food and wine were just perfect. (R758)

Awe is the most desirable output by service providers because they desire tourists to be satisfied with their products or services (Coghlan et al., 2012). These indicators are believed to impact tourists' satisfaction, behavioural intentions, and attitudes (Faullant et al., 2011). A study by Tian et al. (2015) indicated that a sense of awe determines tourist satisfaction and tourists' loyalty. Studies on awe in tourism experiences are paid less attention and it has received attention in tourism research based on a qualitative study (Wang & Lyu, 2019).

Novelty

Interpretive indicators for novelty were mentioned such as 'something a bit different', 'different rather than visiting the restaurant in the city', a 'different dining experience', 'different dishes, tastes, and foods of Rome', 'new friends and cultures from different parts of the world', 'new recipes/ingredients through its history' and a 'totally new and exciting perspective'. This was also emphasized by R712, a male Israeli participant who posted: '*They don't just feed you – they will take the time to talk with you about the ingredients, their stories about their food, culture, and their native Italy*' and a female American participant (R792) mentioned '*Loved meeting new people and enjoying a truly local experience*'. Participants generally mentioned the novelty of foods and the home-restaurant experience with hosts.

According to Cohen (1972), novelty and strangeness are significant components in the tourist experience but modern tourists are not ready to experience these elements profoundly in the destination. It also varies between tourists. According to Sthapit (2017), seeking novelty of foods denotes that tourists want to try different tastes in tourism settings. Moreover, previous research highlighted that questing novelty for foods is consistent with escaping from tourists' everyday life by discovering and learning new local foods in the destination (Kim & Eves, 2012; Quan & Wang, 2004). It has been stated that novelty-seeking for food choices is considered as one of the major motivation of tourists (Mak et al., 2012). As a new social dining service, meal-sharing economy platform will be preferred by international tourists who desire to meet their curiosity and seek novelty for new services (Ji et al., 2016; Lee, 2019).

A study by Çanakçı and Birdir (2020) highlighted that food tourists have a personal tendency to taste unexplored and unfamiliar products and services in the destination. In particular, local food tourists try to experience a familiar culture and to learn cultural elements from their destinations such as local foods, recipes, ingredients, and so on (Suntikul et al., 2020). Moreover, Kim et al. (2010) implied that unusual, atypical, or distinctive experiences can have a strong effect on tourists rather than typical ones.

Servicescape

Most of the participants described servicescape mainly as live music, a local and international atmosphere, a clean, neat, table and food presentation, safety, a convivial atmosphere, and ambience of the place. Findings illustrated that servicescape plays a significant role in the meal-sharing experience. It has a strong effect on the loyalty and the recommendation of services (Harris & Ezeh, 2008). This is highlighted by the reviews of three participants;

The food was outstanding and a powerful representation of Roman cooking. **(R353)**

The apartment and the table were beautifully decorated and the food was delicious. **(R435)**

They are very attentive and warmhearted hosts, they think about details from explaining how to find them and beautiful house decorations to a wonderful atmosphere during the dinner and exceptional food. **(R757)**

Servicescape is a major component of a memorable food experience (Sthapit, 2017). Kotler (1973) used the notion of servicescape with the term 'atmosphere' and emphasized that this attribute is used to make an impression on the customers' minds. When tourists evaluate a service or product, they make decisions based on the appearance of them (Levitt, 1981). Tourism businesses use elements such as ambience, service, decor, and design to differentiate themselves from other businesses (Lee, 2011). Furthermore, these businesses create a sustainable servicescape to satisfy customers and keep them longer at the businesses (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). In a study by Harris and Ezeh (2008), they concluded that odour, cleanliness, layout, furniture, and physical characteristics of staff in restaurants determine customer loyalty. Dong and Siu (2013) highlighted that physical servicescapes can be more effective than communicative servicescapes. However, in our study, both of them were determined to be major components of the meal-sharing experience.

Conclusion and implications

Meal-sharing economy platforms are becoming much more popular among travellers. Modern tourists are travelling to experience local foods by interacting with locals through such platforms. Although well known by tourism scholars and travellers, no studies have attempted to clarify the components which influence the meal-sharing experience. This research has attempted to fill this gap by providing new insights into the understanding of the meal-sharing experience via the netnography approach. Therefore, the main purpose of this research was to explore the components of the meal-sharing experience with local foods from the perspective of the netnography method. Qualitative data was collected and examined based on the principles of the netnography

method. Seven components of the meal-sharing experience were identified; authenticity, social interaction, local hospitality, awe, local culture, novelty, and servicescape.

Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study has improved the meal-sharing experience literature and helped to clarify some unexplored points for further studies which aim to measure the meal-sharing experience. It has been widely known that meal-sharing economy platforms will continue to proliferate in the future and researchers should focus on understanding customer experiences via reviews posted online (Gursoy, 2018). The findings show that social interaction and local hospitality are the major components that contribute to enhancing the meal-sharing experience. Hosts' characteristics and providing participants with a comfortable atmosphere are significant elements for them. Therefore, this is a meaningful and important finding for research which aims to examine the meal-sharing experience.

Components such as authenticity, local culture, novelty, and servicescape are other significant parts of the meal-sharing experience. The reviews posted by participants highlighted that Roman food culture is a rich and authentic element. Therefore, this stimulated a sense of authenticity, knowing the local culture, and finding something novel in the destination. Other features are dependent on the characteristics and professionalism of hosts. These components are in accord with recent studies indicating that authenticity, social interaction, local hospitality, local culture, novelty, and servicescape can determine the meal-sharing experience (Choe & Kim, 2018; Kim et al., 2009; Kivela & Crotts, 2009; Seyitoglu, 2020; Sthapit, 2017). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no studies have previously explored the 'awe' component in the food experience and the sharing economy literature. It seems somehow underestimated in the relevant literature. Thus, exploring this component can have great importance for tourism scholars investigating the meal-sharing experience. Moreover, the role of awe in tourism studies has received more attention in recent years and its impact on tourists' satisfaction, behavioural intentions, and attitudes (Faullant et al., 2011) are well recognized. In our research, awe was regarded as one of the most significant components in the meal-sharing experience and is thought to be a significant contribution to relevant literature.

This study emphasizes two contributions to the netnography approach. First, this approach is very relevant in the investigation and understanding of the tourist experience because it is 'naturalistic', 'unobtrusive', and 'objective' (Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Second, the netnography method has not yet been utilized to examine the meal-sharing experience and its adoption confirmed that it is very well suited to this research area.

Practical implications

These results also have significant managerial implications. The study offers findings that can be used to differentiate service providers and suggests that local food tourists might have a better experience by focusing on and enabling experiential components of the meal-sharing experience. When the authors collected the data, they discovered that some service providers did not pay significant attention to travellers. However, other service providers received at least 50 reviews from the travellers. The reviewers posted their experience and mentioned the characteristics of the host. Thus, it was seen that this aspect was important for hosts and Zurek (2016) observed that the sincerity of hosts led to positive outcomes for both parties, namely both guests and hosts. When reviews were examined, guests mentioned their intention to revisit and recommend the service provider they experienced as a result of positive interaction. The most important aspect of this interaction was providing their home for guests and creating positive communication with them such as acting like a friend or a member of the family. Furthermore, talent for the preparation of food is considered to be the most important aspect of the

meal-sharing experience. For example, some reviewers posted about Italian pasta, meatballs, paprika sauce, tiramisu, and other Italian delicacies. They emphasized that this memorable moment is the most significant for the meal-sharing experience and this was created through not only positive interaction with locals but also a well-cooked meal or well-made Italian food. It is suggested that service providers should work on improving their communication, interaction, and culinary skills.

The study findings show that knowledge of foods and destination can create an intellectual experience for guests. Moreover, this is extremely helpful to promote the local culture of the destination and to enable tourists to experience local authentic cues. Therefore, the focus should be more on how to promote cultural values and how to enable an authentic experience of meal-sharing for travellers through effective host–tourist interactions. Interaction with locals is offered on the meal-sharing platforms (Veen & Dagevos, 2019) enabling guests to gain knowledge of local cuisine, the local ingredients, or recipes, cooking methods, and the local food habits of unfamiliar destinations. Therefore, local hosts should improve their local knowledge and try to help the promotion of their destination. Privitera and Abushena (2019) highlight that the meal-sharing economy provides economic, cultural, and environmental benefits for the development of communities. Planners and destination management organizations should think about encouraging locals to use their homes as restaurants in rural or urban destinations because this sharing economy system is viewed as playing a major role in economic growth and sustainable development.

Limitations and future research

This research has limitations which point to the need for more research and opportunities. First, the findings that have been reported are destination-specific and components can differ across destinations. Therefore, future studies should investigate other participants' meal-sharing experiences in different destinations. In this way, a clear understanding of the meal-sharing experience can be determined. Second, this study only focused on understanding the meal-sharing experience with local foods and did not cover the views of hosts. Future studies could investigate understanding their motivations or experiences. Third, entrepreneurship in the sharing economy is so important that tourism scholars are trying to find out the key factors of entrepreneurship (Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2018). Therefore, future studies could examine the role of entrepreneurship within a meal-sharing economy context.

A further limitation of this study relates to the data of the research. The research sample was participants' reviews. Although reviews posted reflect their experience, real communication with participants would be better to understand their experience. Future studies could overcome this issue. Priporas et al. (2017) implied that it is important to better understand how each dimension of service quality can contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Further research could examine meal-sharing economy participants' service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty toward service providers. Finally, components of the meal-sharing experience that take place could help tourism scholars by extending the investigation of the emerging research area of Eatwith.

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