

Homebound: Has Independent Restaurant Take-Out Created New 'At-Home' Gastronomic
Experiences?

by

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Abstract

This research explored dining experiences of homebound consumers in Ottawa, Canada and examined whether the COVID-19 pandemic allowed independent restaurant "take-out" to become a new dining experience among individuals. This qualitative study conducted 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews to identify changes in consumer behaviour attributed to events from the global pandemic. While COVID-19 began to impact the restaurant industry in March 2020, this research was conducted in August 2020, five months after the pandemic's introduction. Consumers and industry professionals offered insights into the current local-restaurant industry status, including business closures, worker layoffs, and mental health conditions. The findings showcase the importance of socializing, comfort, and safety, while emerging outcomes included the creation of new eating habits and experiences. Conclusions from this study can provide valuable consumer information as independent businesses slowly start to regain operations. Recommendations include repeating the research in a post-pandemic study to re-evaluate take-out experiences among consumers.

Keywords: homebound, COVID-19, take-out, dining experience, restaurant industry, qualitative, thematic analysis, Ottawa, Canada

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Homebound: Has Independent Restaurant Take-Out Created New 'At-Home'**Gastronomic Experiences?**

On January 25, 2020, the first report of the COVID-19 virus was reported in Toronto, Ontario. By March 13 more Canadian provinces started to declare states of emergency (Goddard, 2020). Since the introduction of COVID-19, business and social restrictions have limited public interactions and restaurant operations. The virus forced governments and policymakers to safeguard the public by introducing social distancing measures, business closures and any method necessary to reduce virus transmissions (Goddard, 2020; Spiegel & Tookes, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Peistikou, 2021). In March 2020, the Canadian government placed mandatory policies which intervened with restaurant operations; as a side effect as the public was forced to stay at home and restaurants began to close (Statistics Canada, 2021b). The introduction of COVID-19 resulted in an unpredictable labour market loss where over 800,000 Canadian food sector employees lost their jobs in 2020 as the foodservice sector lost 20 billion in sales (Larue, 2020; Restaurants Canada, 2020a; Statistics Canada, 2021a).

Before the pandemic, Canada's foodservice sector brought in 93 billion in revenues yearly while providing jobs for 1.2 million individuals and serving 22 million customers across the country daily (Restaurants Canada, 2020). However, between 2020 and 2021, the industry lost an estimated 44.8 billion in sales from the impacts of COVID-19, putting Ontario in one out of the six most affected Canadian regions with the most employee layoffs and more than 10,000 business closures (Restaurants Canada, 2020; Restaurants Canada, 2021b; Statistics Canada, 2021a). Restaurants Canada (2021a) stated, "the 2020 recession will go down in history as the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression" (pg.6). In Ontario, the pandemic

accelerated disruption in the foodservice industry while blocking supply and demand.

Restaurants Canada (2021b) wrote:

The 2020 recession was not caused by a lack of consumer demand per se, but a lack of supply (i.e., lack of places to spend) due to widespread shutdowns of non-essential business, border closures and restricted travel, which reduced consumer and business spending. (pg. 7)

Canada encountered socio-economic challenges as the government implemented necessary measures to secure people's safety through travel restrictions, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders (Goddard, 2020). In addition, health concerns limited usual restaurant operations as the government set limited capacity mandates for restaurants (Bufquin et al., 2021; Chang & Meyerhoefer, 2020; Cooper, 2020; Goddard, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Mohammed, 2020; Spiegel & Tookes, 2020). However, through alternate food distribution methods such as delivery and take-out, some businesses remained operational through pivoting their business model.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to the pandemic more than 54 percent of Canadians consumed food in restaurants at least once a week. Specifically, 97,000 Canadian restaurants received an average of 22 million visits per day in 2018 (Polsky & Garriguet, 2021). Since March 2020, stay-at-home policies changed Canadian residents' relationship with food. Housebound crowds realized they were susceptible to contracting the virus, resulting in people becoming accustomed to eating more meals at home (Hobbs, 2020; Goddard, 2020). Food habits started to change as dine-in restaurants were not operational or had limited capacity, causing the food retail and foodservice sectors to strain while seeking alternate solutions to remain functional (Hobbs, 2020; Goddard,

2020; Spiegel & Tookes, 2020). Consumer demand for online food delivery systems overwhelmed the industry in the first few months of social isolation as consumers could only purchase take-out and delivery meals, showcasing a need to be met in the foodservice industry (Goddard, 2020; Klein, 2020; Norris, Taylor & Taylor, 2021). Consequently, government restrictions and public safety forced businesses to adapt to current circumstances and ultimately satisfy consumer demand.

Purpose of the Study

Food delivery has risen during COVID-19 enabling restaurant owners to modify their services to customer demand. Rendaje (2021) explains that 31 percent of Canadian consumers favoured curbside pick-up or home delivery services during the pandemic, and it is estimated that take-out will continue to be preferred even after the pandemic. However, researchers predict that the restaurant industry will face uncertainties once government restrictions eventually ease, such as the lack of qualified workforce for the sector or endure many small business closures (Hum, 2021; Neufeld, 2021).

Similarly, Hum (2021) and Neufeld (2021) convey skepticism on the data produced during this time as there is unpredictability on the amount of time needed for the restaurant industry to rebound.

Currently, there is little academic research investigating consumer motivation for ordering take-out during the pandemic. Based on previous research by Di Renzo et al. (2020), many individuals found the pandemic lifestyle challenging to adapt to, which interfered with eating habits. Previous research in consumer behaviour by Hansen (2005) indicated that external factors interfered with a consumer's experience when they ate in a restaurant setting. A more

recent survey from Restaurants Canada (2021a) in May 2021 found that 89% of consumers want to dine in a restaurant with friends and family when the pandemic is over. Therefore, this study examined dining experiences at home and investigated consumer motivations for eating take-out at home during the pandemic to discover if COVID-19 has created new eating habits.

To explore consumer motivations among homebound diners in Ottawa during COVID-19, the following research questions guided the research design for this inquiry:

RQ1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out meal experience during the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of ordering food from local independent restaurants during the pandemic?

RQ3: How do consumers compare a take-out gastronomic experience versus dining in a traditional restaurant setting?

Significance of the study

Over the years, dining-out has been a research topic for many scholars, with the purpose of establishing the motivations behind customer satisfaction in a restaurant dining experience which are analyzed in the literature review (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Rawson et al., 2013; Taar, 2014; Gregorash, 2018; Sasson, 2019; Brown et al., 2020). Recently, scholars have examined dining experiences during COVID-19 while identifying the factors influencing restaurant closures and how pivoting a business model can affect customer acquisitions and retention (Spiegel & Tookes, 2020; Tuzovic et al., 2021; Peistikou, 2021). Authors See-Kwong et al. (2017), Singh (2019), Suhartanto et al., (2019), Pathak and Saraf (2020) conducted research

on the effectiveness of online delivery systems for restaurants and concluded that the industry is changing rapidly due to consumer demand. Restaurants benefit from utilizing online ordering platforms while restaurants remain limited due to mandated restrictions. While the premise of consumer experience in the changing restaurant industry has been documented to a degree in peer reviewed and grey literature by Finch, (2019), Panse et al., (2019) Kelso, (2020), Klein, (2020), Peistikou, (2020); more research is needed to examine dining-at-home motivations, take-out food and consumer experience of a homebound consumer during the pandemic. To support the premise of further investigation, Resendes (2021) explains that take-out and delivery services have evolved into a new market sector within the industry during the pandemic, which remains unexplored (Resendes, 2021).

COVID-19 forced business closures and impacted the Canadian foodservice industry. With unemployment rates peaking at 13.7% in May 2020, the restaurant industry started to recuperate by December 2020 with a rate of 8.6% as a reaction to many businesses pivoting to meet consumer demand (Restaurants Canada, 2021a). Therefore, by understanding consumer motivations for ordering take-out during the pandemic, businesses can adapt to changes in consumer behaviour as the industry regains traction.

Moreover, by conducting studies on the local restaurant industry in Ottawa, researchers can gather data to mitigate and safeguard practices learnt during this time, develop tools against similar financial crises in the restaurant industry, and potentially identify the implications caused during this time. Furthermore, as a historical component to the events of COVID-19 and for future reference; by further investigating consumer experience, educators and academics can utilize this information as a learning tool showcasing the resilience, ingenuity and

troubleshooting owners and businesses developed to be able to continue offering their services to their patrons during a time of duress.

Theoretical Perspective

To understand consumer motivation, this research study examined previous studies on dining experiences and the meal attributes that promote pleasure (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Warde & Martens, 2000; Spinelli et al., 2014; Taar, 2014; Gregorash, 2018).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), "an experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event" (p.11). In that same manner, a positive dining experience produces a satisfying result for the customer and will lead to more favourable outcomes such as revisitation, loyalty, and trust. Those attributes become catalysts in creating motivating gastronomic experiences for the consumer and promote revisitation (Hansen, 2005; Campo-Martinez et al., 2010; Gregorash, 2018). Restaurant offerings and services are categorized on their level of importance to the customer's needs. In past studies, factors such as price, ambiance, menu items, type of cuisine, quality, availability, and restaurant cleanliness have been proven to affect consumers' overall restaurant experience (Hansen, 2005). Authors Pine and Gilmore (1998) wrote about the importance of making experiences notable, "... commodities are fungible, goods tangible and services intangible, experiences are memorable" (p.11). In essence, consumers will evaluate the overall encounter and compare it to previous and future experiences regarding product quality, price, and ambiance.

Meanwhile, Gustafsson et al. (2006) wrote:

The context of a meal is important for the acceptance and consumption of a meal. Accordingly, the context includes the food product itself, the consumer, and the environment. These three factors need to be considered in an integrated manner because they affect each other. (p. 84)

Therefore, the meal experience relies on multiple codependent factors that need to align for the consumer to receive an experience worthy of remembering. While this study explored dining motivations during the pandemic, it aims to contribute to previous studies on consumer experiences with a focus on dining at home during the pandemic.

Research Method

This qualitative study is characterized by an inductive methodological approach, whereby the researcher collected data from the participants to extract recurring themes and provide findings. Primary data collection was completed using semi-structured interviews supported by the analysis of literature and other data sources related to COVID-19. To minimize the effects of singular data collection biases and to increase the interpretive credibility of the research findings, data collection involved semi-structured interviews from ten consumers and eight professionals in the restaurant industry. This research utilized textbooks and articles to verify methods and theories and grey literature such as restaurant industry articles, since studies on take-out during COVID-19 did not have much recorded substantiated information. Therefore, reports and government articles were necessary attributes to support the current phenomenon and allow the researcher to formulate a complete perspective on consumer experience.

Definition of Key Terms

Gastronomic Experiences. The first definition of gastronomy was written in 1862 by Brillat Savarin, as the study of 'good eating' defined as "the knowledge and understanding of all that relates to man as he eats. Its purpose is to ensure the conservation of men, using the best food possible." (Schlosburg, 2011, para. 2). In a recent study, Gregorash (2018) explained that gastronomic experiences could be subjective; he proceeds by defining "gastronomy is more than the art of eating it is the art of living well by being thoughtfully active (environmentally, too) with food and beverage gathering, and the preparation, and/or consumption and education" (p.17). In this study, the term 'gastronomic experiences' combines both terminologies and is used to describe enjoyable food experiences had by consumers.

Restaurant Professionals. This study utilized opinions by restaurant industry professionals - who are labeled as such in this paper and are regarded as experts. As explained in Williams et al., (2019), experts are individuals with superior experience, knowledge, and insight into current industry events (Williams et al., 2019).

Pivoting. According to Guillén (2020, para. 2), "Pivoting is a lateral move that creates enough value for the customer and the firm to share." While business closures dominated in the early onset of COVID-19, some restaurants pivoted their business model to pursue survival, promoting resilience and growth through other means of income and maintaining satisfied clientele. According to researchers, pivoting occurs when a business markets and sells a product using what are considered non-traditional methods for that industry (Guillen, 2020; Peistikou, 2021).

Ghost Kitchens. Professional kitchen spaces rented out by the hour, month or year to business owners who don't have a steady brick-and-mortar location. Ghost kitchens are also known as virtual kitchens, cloud kitchens, dark kitchens, and commissary kitchens. These professional businesses are defined only by their virtual image, product, and popularity; they don't rely on location, service staff or atmosphere but reach their customers through their online platforms via application or the internet (See-Kwong et al., 2017; Panse et al., 2019; Chauhan et al., 2020; Peistikou, 2021).

Curbside Pick-up. Curbside pick-up service is when businesses have the option for their customers to place an order either in person, via telephone, online or through an app and pick it up at a local store without entering the establishment (King, 2020; Fotouhi et al., 2021). The consumer parks their car or waits in a designated area near the store while a store associate brings the order to the consumer. This method is convenient because customers don't even have to leave their cars, making the transaction faster, safer, and ultimately more efficient for all parties, especially during the pandemic. Many stores have reported a rise in their sales due to having curbside pick-up (King, 2020).

Take-Out. Under the Cambridge Dictionary, (n.d.) take-out is “a meal bought at a store or restaurant and taken somewhere else to be eaten”, however, in this study the term take-out refers to meals and beverages purchased and consumed at home during COVID-19.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic plummeted Canada's foodservice sales to their lowest level in more than twenty years since the last recession. According to Restaurants Canada (2021), 10 per cent of foodservice businesses have permanently closed; however, even though experts forecast an industry regeneration within the next two years, the road to economic

recovery will not be easy. Some businesses weathered the difficulties and flourished by pivoting their business model to keep their clientele. Consumers had to adapt, accept, and realize that the current market and social shift would be continuously evolving and therefore become accustomed to businesses adopting new practices. For that reason, this study focused on dining experiences at home and investigated consumer motivations for eating take-out during the pandemic to discover if COVID-19 has created new eating experiences among consumers.

The study begins with a review of known literature concerning the background and concept dimensions of a meal experience in Ottawa. Topics included in the research are the satisfaction and overall consumer experience during COVID-19, including trends, habits, and emerging market patterns. The report continues with the methodology, research strategy in acquiring participants and findings resulting from the data analysis. Lastly follows a discussion of the study's findings, observations, and data interpretation, closing with future research, conclusion, and recommendations.

Literature Review

This study's purpose was to investigate consumer motivations for eating take-out during the pandemic while considering if COVID-19 has created new eating habits among individuals. Researchers Anderson and Mossberg (2004) pose the question, "why do we consume?" (p.171). By answering that simple query, restaurateurs can accurately understand what attracts and satisfies customers' needs. Andersson and Mossberg (2004) agree with other scholars who have concluded in the same rationale; consuming a meal in a restaurant provides comfort, social and intellectual purpose for individuals (Hansen, 2005; Panse et al., 2019). Theories by experts support that the overall meal experience is a hedonic action that creates satisfaction when paired

with service quality, atmosphere, or other supportive functions (Anderson & Mossberg, 2004; Spinelli et al., 2014; Taar, 2014). Consumer experience is perceived as an inherently personal feeling. It triggers a part of the consumer's emotional, intellectual, physical or spiritual state of mind; therefore, an experience is an individually felt construct, unique to every person (Gregorash, 2018; Jarvis, 1987; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In addition, Sims (2009) writes that a restaurant's meal experience also connects consumers to a region as people can experience culture and heritage by consuming local food at independent restaurants, thus amplifying its authenticity.

People often dine in restaurants, not because they are hungry, but because it is a fun activity (Hansen, 2005). They enjoy the ambiance, socializing with others, sharing food and engaging in conversations, thus allowing themselves to relax and temporarily abandon work and life obligations (Hansen, 2005; Gregorash, 2018; Sasson, 2019; Ha, 2020). Dining in restaurants can be seen as a ritual that connects people through a mutual activity, creating an experience worth revisiting (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Similarly, according to Taar (2014) familiar environments promoting casual eating or everyday cooking at home are not perceived as extraordinary.

The following sections successively describe the concept of an experience followed by defining meal experiences and closing with consumer experiences during the pandemic. Furthermore, a portion will be dedicated to acknowledging the pandemic's mental health implications to global communities and the effect on people's views and relationship to food.

Defining an Experience

Pine and Gilmore (1998) explain that experiences are defined as financial services diversified from goods, where a paid transaction is made between the consumer and the business for an intangible commodity, in this case, an experience. In addition, Pine and Gilmore (1998) explain, that experiences are created when a business "intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable" (p.98). For example, consumers understand that dining in a restaurant is a paid experience which includes tangible and intangible attributes. Tangible being the drinks and food, and intangible, the table service, music, beautiful surroundings, and atmosphere (Hansen, 2005). In essence, services have become commoditized, where companies add or design experiences around their standardized offerings to upsell their products for a fee which adds more value to the overall experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Hansen, 2005). Hansen (2005) described how certain factors may influence and may hinder a good dining experience such as poor service, lack of staff training or room ambiance.

However, even though researchers and professionals in the foodservice industry have dedicated much effort to documenting the concept and delivery of an experience, economic and social changes can alter and transform the definition or practice of the same notion. Hansen (2005) wrote that satisfaction, leisure, and necessity are considered grounds for eating out, where consumers search to experience something different from their daily routine. For example, eating out is like taking a break from cooking at home or serving others at the family table; instead, consumers can relax while being served, they can socialize while having a treat or having a meal

to curb their hunger (Hansen, 2005; Warde & Martens, 2005). On the other hand, Gregorash (2018) added that eating out is more than an event or an activity; it has become a way of life and concluded that authentic gastronomic experiences attract consumers.

Hansen (2005), Gregorash (2018) and Taar (2014) explored tangible and intangible gastronomical characteristics of an authentic restaurant experience and found unique attributes such as atmosphere, service and food, were responsible for creating unique gastronomic experiences. From a food operator's perspective, it is essential to examine the fundamental reasons customers seek variety within their offerings, as a satisfactory dining experience will allow the customer to maintain a sense of gratification and lead to positive word of mouth and revisitation (Sasson, 2019; Ha, 2020; National Post, 2020). In other words, consumer satisfaction leads to more favourable behavioural intentions such as revisiting or re-ordering intentions (Ha, 2020). Therefore, by exploring consumer dining experiences during COVID-19, it is possible to determine factors that influence consumer motivations.

Meal Experiences

Meals are often described in contextual settings, such as a romantic dinner or a business dinner, where in essence, eating food connects individuals builds and maintains relationships (Cohen & Babey, 2012; Warde & Martens, 2000). Meal experiences can be divided into categories depending on the occasion and can further include a combination of activities such as eating inside or outside a domestic atmosphere (Hansen, 2005). Previous studies verify that people often eat in restaurants for various reasons, including the necessity to fulfill hunger as a fundamental need, or even because it is a fun and enjoyable outing, same as going to the movies or theatre. Similarly, dining in restaurants is a social construct; it is a form of recreation, a shared

activity among acquaintances, friends, and family members; described as a cherished action, a ritual connecting people or creating memorable experiences (Hansen 2005; Gregorash, 2018; Sasson, 2019). Individuals enjoy the ambiance, socializing with others, sharing food, and engaging in meaningful conversations, further amplifying the likelihood of repeating the meal experience (Gregorash, 2018; Ha, 2020; Hansen, 2005; Sasson, 2019). In addition, Andersson and Mossberg (2004) write that food satisfies physiological, social and intellectual needs. In essence, a restaurant experience is more than just having a meal; customers feel as though they are part of society and have a sense of belonging within the community when they dine out (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). Similarly, there aren't enough studies presently to compare what a consumer experiences when they consume take-out at home, which is a gap that this study aims to address.

Consumer Experiences during COVID-19

The COVID-19 virus settled in Canada in March 2020, forcing the government to safeguard the public by any means necessary which resulted in pausing operations in many industries to reduce virus transmissions (Goddard, 2020; Spiegel & Tookes, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Peistikou, 2021).

Consumer acquisition and retention have always been focal points for business success; however, during the pandemic restaurant industry professionals realized the importance of understanding the consumer experience.

Marketing experts Diebner et al., 2020 write:

COVID-19 has overwhelmed lives and livelihoods around the globe. It has also forced a rethinking of what customer care means for vulnerable individuals and the customer teams that serve them. Suddenly, examinations of customer journeys and satisfaction metrics to inform what customers want has given way to an acute urgency to address what they need. (p. 2)

The pandemic has forced Canadian foodservice operators to find ways to provide a satisfying meal experience to their customers while keeping in mind that customer acquisition and retention in restaurants no longer requires elements, such as ambiance and table service (Pathak & Saraf, 2020).

According to Restaurants Canada (2021a), restaurant operators need to continue prioritizing digital mediums to reach their clientele and engage with their customers using social media and apps. The unforgiving nature of the pandemic towards restaurants and loss of business while utilizing digital pathways will allow the foodservice industry to reach new customers and increase revenue during this new era (Chang & Meyerhoefer, 2020; Restaurants Canada, 2021a). Online business presence and community influence have become points of reference for motivating consumers in purchasing products during the pandemic.

Peistikou (2021) argued that restaurants with a pre-existing online platform in motion before the pandemic maintained and gained more clientele during COVID-19 since consumers were accustomed to placing an order through websites and online ordering systems. Klein (2020), Hobbs (2020), and Norris et al. (2021) agreed that consumer demand for online food delivery systems overwhelmed the foodservice industry in the first few months of social

isolation, showcasing a need to be met for online delivery services and businesses adapting to change.

The pandemic created an opportunity for optimization where food distribution platforms aggregated demand from multiple businesses allowing consumers the power of choice. For socially distancing individuals, food delivery systems provided a critical avenue to acquire restaurant-quality meals when restaurant services were inaccessible; thus, allowing consumers to replicate a restaurant-dining experience at home (Di Renzo et al., 2020). Furthermore, many workers lost their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic, but the expansion of food delivery services permitted individuals to find alternate employment opportunities in the foodservice sector (Hobbs, 2020; Klein, 2020; Li et al., 2020). By the middle of 2020, Canada faced multiple labour market disruptions, with some of the highest unemployment rates (Government of Canada, 2021).

Meanwhile, small local restaurants with no online presence struggled to maintain operations. They had to partner with third-party platforms such as Uber Eats, Door Dash and Skip the Dishes to offer restaurant-to-consumer delivery services, making them more appealing and necessary for housebound populations. Online food distribution channels allowed restaurants to remain operational as they promoted and advertised smaller businesses for a percentage of the profit per order (Gunden et al., 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Klein, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Raj et al., 2020). At the same time, stay-at-home consumers had the option to order from their desired restaurant locations in a less time-consuming and convenient manner without fear of contracting the virus, making take-out service a must-have for most food selling establishments (Gunden et al., 2020).

While this study does not focus on chain establishments, it is worth noting that COVID-19 impacted the foodservice industry in its entirety. Franchise food providers such as KFC, Dominos, McDonald's, and local restaurants saw the prospect of creating partnerships with third-party platforms to raise their revenues during this time and, by doing so, causing more competition for smaller independent restaurants (Hobbs, 2020). Authors Yeo et al., (2017) and Li et al. (2020) agree that consumers favour convenient and less time-consuming online services and find them more valuable. Meanwhile, food delivery companies continue to capitalize from third party platforms as they enabled the foodservice market to retain some of its pre-pandemic sales volume at a cost (Hobbs, 2020; Klein, 2020).

During the pandemic, consumers in Ottawa were restricted in ordering food for delivery, take-out, and curbside pick-up with a limited capacity dine-in option. Klein (2020) writes that consumers have accepted the concept of delivery and pick-up instead of the traditional eating out due to social distancing and escalated concerns for health and safety. Supporting the notion, a study by Tuzovic et al. (2021) found that crowding in spaces during the pandemic affected customer experiences, satisfaction and revisitation. Specifically:

Public health regulations and social distancing measures impact consumers' dining experiences and their comfort/discomfort when among other diners. When people visit a restaurant during the COVID-19 era, these domains of wellbeing seem to be very important for the individual, and they influence not only the restaurant choice, but also the overall dining experience and the intention to revisit. (Tuzovic et al., 2021, p. 9)

However, restaurants offering take-out and delivery services managed to remain active through the pandemic as they could sell their product while other businesses shut down. Some

chose to operate only their kitchens utilizing primarily kitchen staff such as cooks and chefs and eliminating service staff to stay viable and make up some running costs. Those restaurants quickly developed into under-the-radar- type of establishments what are otherwise known as ghost kitchens. Ghost kitchens have been called trailblazing concepts since their appearance in the last decade. They have reshaped the idea of a dining experience where consumers order a reasonably priced meal to be picked up or have it delivered to their doorstep (Panse et al., 2019; Chauhan et al., 2020; Hess, 2020; Kelso, 2020; Peistikou, 2021). Ghost kitchens reduce financial risk for small businesses however, even prominent brands such as McDonald's are also pivoting their business models and jumping on the opportunity to maintain operations during the pandemic to meet consumer demand (Klein, 2020; Kelso, 2020). Previous studies on commissary kitchens postulate their continuous rise as the new food service concept that minimizes costs for the owner yet appeals to customers because their menu products are offered through mobile applications, websites and social media for fast and easy ordering (Muller, 2018; Choudhary, 2019; Finch, 2019; Panse et al., 2019; Chauhan et al., 2020; Hess, 2020; Klein, 2020; Kelso, 2020; Li et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, many restaurants opted to pivot and remain operational even if that meant not utilizing the dining room; using the kitchen only to produce meals was still a winning situation allowing businesses to keep working, gaining clientele and keep some of their staff occupied (Peistikou, 2021). Many companies pivoted their business models in Ottawa and became ghost kitchens until restrictions could ease (Restaurants Canada, 2021a).

According to Restaurants Canada (2020) for a significant portion of 2020, consumers didn't have access to their usual eating-out services, forcing them to order more take-out. The

main reason for ordering take-out during his period was to experience a typical restaurant meal prepared by professional chefs or cooks with the difference of it being delivered at home (Ha, 2020; Pathak & Saraf, 2020). However, many businesses could not meet take-out demand due to lack of professional help such as qualified cooks (Hum, 2021). In Ontario, restaurants reported being short staffed as a result of the pandemic. Repeated lockdowns, layoffs, and fear of contracting the virus pushed workers to find employment in other industries (Hum, 2021). At the same time, recent studies found that consumers cooked at home during the pandemic out of necessity as they didn't have access to delivery (Pathak & Saraf, 2020; Restaurants Canada, 2020). Previous studies found that restaurants will continue to evolve as people have become accustomed to convenient, efficient and comfortable eating at home, whether it is a home-cooked meal or take-out (Chang & Meyerhoefer, 2020; Grande, 2020; Goddard, 2020; Ha, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Mohammed, 2020; Singh, 2019; Yeo et al., 2017). More recently, Restaurants Canada (2021a) confirmed that take-out services have multiplied through the years and even more during the pandemic which supports that more research for take-out experiences is needed.

Researchers Anderson and Mossberg (2004), as well as Grande (2020), delve into the reasons why people enjoy consuming food; individuals appreciate the social aspects of eating with friends, the safety and pleasure of dining with family; or even the calming benefits of consuming a meal alone. Consuming food is a critical yet necessary component of our day. Under typical everyday circumstances, most people choose to have food at home and eat in restaurants on occasions, such as a business meeting or a family get-together (Restaurants Canada, 2020).

On the other hand, ordering take-out or eating at home has its privileges. Researchers supported that take-out has been a popular concept, even before COVID-19, due to being cost-efficient, timesaving, rewarding and easy (Ha, 2020; Norris et al., 2021; Pance et al., 2019). Consumers can conveniently order food to be delivered to their doorstep, therefore skipping the trouble of leaving the house for a meal (Yeo et al., 2017). A study by Yeo et al. (2017) has shown a direct correlation between consumer satisfaction and convenience where the meal experience became positive when there was no travelling involved. Meal experiences at home have been described as comfortable and relaxed where consumers interact privately with friends or family and avoid being in a time-sensitive and fast-paced environment such as a restaurant (Taar 2014; Grande, 2020).

Through their study, Di Renzo et al., (2020) found that the pandemic put people under duress which caused emotional eating as a side effect. Goddard (2020) agrees and describes how the stay-at-home policy severely changed Canadian residents' relationship with food as having more available time heightened residents' exposure to food. Ha (2020) and Hobbs (2020) agree that housebound crowds were now cognizant and aware of their vulnerabilities against the virus. In a short time, the public became accustomed to eating meals at home, thus modifying previous consumer behavior; dine-in restaurants could no longer operate in their usual capacity, causing the food retail and foodservice sectors to strain while seeking alternate solutions to remain functional (Ha, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Goddard, 2020; Spiegel & Tookes, 2020). Simultaneously, safety measures negatively impacted people globally, increasing anxiety and stress, further affecting livelihoods.

A study by Nutley et al. (2021), found that the global effects of the pandemic presented symptoms of increased depression and anxiety in Chinese communities, which raised concerns associated with an increase in take-out and food consumption. Specifically, this study proved that the COVID-19 confinement measures drastically changed individuals' living environment, daily routine, and coping behaviours. As a result, people resorted to using food as a coping mechanism (Nutley et al., 2021) and saw it less as an experience. Usher et al. (2020) wrote, "People tend to feel anxious and unsafe when the environment changes." (p. 315). Gadermann et al., (2021) reported that "the pandemic has led to unprecedented global morbidity and mortality, with population mental health impacts recognized as a growing concern" (p. 1). Restaurants Canada (2020a) reported that "In the 12 months ending April 2021, food delivery sales jumped to a record \$6.9 billion, a 55.3% increase over the same period a year prior" (p. 34).

On the contrary, Taar (2014) argued that people tend to appreciate and remember their restaurant experiences more than those at home because of the ambiance, attending staff and table service. However, due to the effects of COVID-19, people's dining choices have been limited to homebound experiences, inadvertently forcing consumers to acquire new eating patterns (Goddard, 2020; Peistikou, 2021) hence the need to research take-out experiences.

In closing, Klein (2020) writes that consumers have accepted the concept of take-out instead of dining out because they can enjoy a meal tailored to their needs, amplifying their meal experiences at home. Even though Hansen (2005) and Warde and Martens (2000) verified that satisfaction, leisure, and necessity are predominant factors for dining out, during the pandemic people were forced to eat at home, making the prime context of eating a meal a requirement instead of pleasure (Goddard, 2020). Hansen (2005) writes that while cooking at home may be

less costly, people continue to prefer dining at restaurants for reasons of convenience, socialization, and entertainment. Anderson and Mossberg (2004) identified food as the main objective for an ideal dining experience where factors such as service, restaurant interior, and company are secondary. From the industry's perspective, statistics revealed the identification of take-out as a new core-market segment and defined the need for businesses to focus their efforts on online platforms and delivery. In contrast, focusing on take-out, significantly competes with the restaurant dining experience and further amplifies the need for researching consumer behaviour in this new era of digitized foodservice offerings (Restaurants Canada, 2021a).

While researchers predict that COVID-19 will remain a threat to communities for the unforeseeable future, they also indicate that the industry will continue to evolve and change to accommodate safety measures. The current industry and social shift forced individuals to adapt to change while leaving little time to acclimate to a new lifestyle, thus supporting the grounds for researching consumer experience and the perceived value of having a take-out meal at home.

Research Methodology and Methods

Purpose and aim

This study aimed to examine dining experiences at home and investigate consumer motivations for eating take-out during the pandemic to discover if COVID-19 has created new eating habits. There is limited research on meal experiences during the pandemic, specifically how take-out food affected consumers in Ottawa during his period. Therefore, the following research questions guided the research design for this inquiry:

RQ1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out meal experience during the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of ordering food from local independent restaurants during the pandemic?

RQ3: How do consumers compare a take-out gastronomic experience versus dining in a traditional restaurant setting?

Theoretical Perspective and Research Design

Brown et al. (2020) wrote, "A qualitative approach is appropriate for research on a topic that has been under-explored to allow an in-depth understanding of the key problems" (p. 7). The area of take-out experiences during the pandemic is an under-explored topic that was aimed to investigate in this qualitative research. In addition, previous consumer experience studies attest to customers actively engaging in qualitative natured studies and can likely provide more information on product quality, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction (Lohrey, n.d.; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Arendt et al., 2012; Rawson et al., 2013). While restaurant performances may be accurately described in numerical data in quantitative analysis, experts explain that mathematical formulas can't accurately showcase behavioural perspectives for foodservice experiences, but qualitative studies are preferable (Arendt et al., 2012; Lohrey, n.d.; See-Kwong et al., 2017). In addition, Gustafsson et al. (2006) and Arendt et al. (2012) wrote that information deriving from a social outlook could pinpoint customer satisfaction, perception, and restaurant service experiences which are attributes necessary in investigating or understanding consumer motivations in meal experiences. Therefore, I chose an exploratory research design to study participant meal experiences and to determine participant motivation for procuring take-out. I

conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with all the participants in this study which is explained in the research methods section.

For this inquiry, I utilized information on qualitative research methods from Robson and McCartan (2016), *Real World Research*, and *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVIVO* by Jackson and Bezeley (2019). I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as per Braun and Clarke (2019) with an inductive approach to address participant meal experiences, perceptions, and observations. The reflexive TA method is flexible and does not follow a specific theory or a set of rules, but the data content dictates the theme development. In addition, a TA helps identify patterns and provides an in-depth analysis across the data set, which is ideal for detecting sequences from participants of various backgrounds (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To summarize, this study aimed to explore consumer dining experiences at home during the pandemic; therefore, a qualitative approach with a reflexive TA was the most favourable method for collecting and analyzing data for this research inquiry.

Purposeful Sampling

Researchers describe purposeful sampling as a term for choosing individuals with specific knowledge of a particular phenomenon that can be positive or negative (Chen, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Peistikou, 2021). In essence, an individual's background may lead to biased results, whether positive or negative. Therefore, I chose to diversify my sample by sectioning the participant body into two categories, consumers who are not affiliated with the restaurant industry and professionals associated with the restaurant industry. I aimed for my sampling to provide quality results from different angles and points of view. As Robson and McCartan

(2016) explain, purposive sampling supports non-probability, allowing the researcher to collect and identify data of more outstanding quality.

Consumers

Specific inclusion criteria were considered for finding suitable consumer participants. Taar (2014) and Hansen (2005) explain that gastronomic dining experiences can be had when food is paired with a glass of wine as it completes a meal experience. However, Ontario's zero-tolerance law prohibits alcohol consumption for vehicle drivers under 21 (Ontario, 2022). After researching further, I discovered that most Canadian car rental companies require a minimum age of 21 years for their rentals for insurance reasons as per Ontario laws on alcohol consumption (Avis, 2022; Enterprise, 2022; National, 2022). Therefore, for reasons of inclusivity, it was essential to acquire participants who didn't have any limitations in partaking in all aspects of a meal experience, whether that experience took place in a restaurant or at home. With those deductions in mind, the first criterion dictated that consumers had to be over 21 years of age. The second criterion was that consumers must have ordered take-out from independent restaurants in the city of Ottawa and the surrounding area during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, exclusion criteria for this participant group included a) being employed in the local restaurant industry, b) not accepting individuals younger than 21 and c) consumers that had not consumed take-out meals from independent restaurants in Ottawa during the pandemic.

Professionals

Purposive sampling was also utilized to identify industry professionals for this research. All qualified individuals were found through word-of-mouth by consulting local business owners in Ottawa to contribute to the study. The inclusion criterion for choosing professionals was their

restaurant industry-related experience or background. Examples of qualified individuals constituted hospitality academics, chefs, and business owners. In addition, the same professionals had to have had take-out experiences in the Ottawa area before and during COVID-19. Exclusion criteria for this group comprised of the participant's educational and experiential background in the local restaurant industry.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the research process, an ethical review was completed through the Royal Roads University Ethical Review Board since the study included human participants. This step ensured that the inquiry abided by ethical considerations and allowed participants to be informed of the collected data usage (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Upon ethical approval, as seen in Appendix A, I started the recruitment process, during which participants were provided with the research consent form, as seen in Appendix B. The consent form defined the purpose and aim of the study, explained the research method utilized, specified participant time commitment, confidentiality, data collection processes, ownership of data, and allowed participants to withdraw at any given time. Consumers signed up for the research through links provided in the initial advertisement on social media, as seen in Appendix C. The ad redirected individuals to a google form to view the research invitation, as seen in Appendix D and is explained in participant selection and recruitment. Similarly, professionals received a link via email to view the invitation and consent letter. All participants reviewed and digitally signed the consent form and were redirected to book a date for their interview through Microsoft Bookings. In addition, as Robson and McCartan (2016) explain about informing participants about the

research process before the study, I verbally repeated information regarding consent, anonymity, and privacy for all participants at the beginning of each interview process.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

An advertisement was placed on social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, as seen in Appendix C, to attract eligible participants for this study. The ad specified the study's purpose and inquired about individuals who met the inclusion criteria for consumers.

Interested parties who applied in the advertisement followed the provided link on the same page, which directed them to a consent letter on google forms, as discussed in ethical considerations. After participants digitally signed the consent letter, the form guided them to a virtual meeting booking portal to arrange a date for their interview.

Through my background as an industry chef and instructor, I was able to ask colleagues to refer interested professionals for my research study. I contacted professional participants from local businesses via email and included the study's research invitation aim and purpose. A total of eight individuals were selected based on the study's criteria during the screening process. Professionals were comprised of hospitality educators, restaurant managers, bakery owners and chefs who provided their restaurant industry perspectives regarding consumer adaptation to industry changes caused by COVID-19.

The recruitment process for consumers and professionals lasted approximately three weeks, beginning from July to August 2021, where 18 individuals were interviewed until data saturation was reached. The interview process lasted about six weeks between August - and September 2021.

Data Collection Method

Robson and McCartan (2016) write, "The interview is a flexible and adaptable way of finding things out" (p. 286). Leech (2002) and Luo and Windemuth (2009) explain that the researcher's goal is to obtain research-relevant information from the interviewee and narrow down specific content guided by the study's objectives. I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect data from all the participants for this research study. Andersson and Mossberg (2004) and Gregorash (2018) described in-depth interviews being the best way to document study participant experiences and interpret factors that made that experience memorable for them. Lohrey (n.d.) explains what attributes make an experience worthwhile as "factors such as the restaurant atmosphere, menu items, the restaurant scene, service and staff quality, the restaurant decision process and personal circumstances help define each experience" (para. 3). The study's focal point was to examine dining experiences at home and investigate consumer motivations for eating take-out during the pandemic to discover if COVID-19 has created new eating habits. Thus, interviewing participants was the most efficient way to converse, extract and record individual observations.

While studies by Leech (2002) and Luo and Windemuth (2009) show that in-person interviews are more reliable, Agusriadi et al. (2021) and Tuzovic et al. (2021) explain that qualitative research methods have suffered during COVID-19 and virtual tools are necessary for successful results. COVID-19 restrictions and government safety guidelines endorsed virtual video calls as the most comfortable way to conduct face-to-face interviews, making the process easy and stress-free for its participants; henceforth, I chose to conduct the interviews through the videoconferencing platform, Zoom. This study's data collection instruments consisted of open-

ended questions, video recording software - Zoom, the interview invitation, and the agreed-upon consent letter informing participants about this research study.

In-depth Semi Structured Interviews

This study examined perceptions and meal experiences from each participant's point of view; therefore, a closer examination of interview methods was necessary to determine which structure would benefit the research (Luo & Windemuth (2009); Robson & McCartan, 2016). Semi-structured interview methods utilize predetermined questions but allow the interviewer to modify the order and retrieve information from participants at the appropriate time (Leech, 2002; Luo & Windemuth, 2009; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Unlike other interview methods, the semi structured form allows questions to be changed, reworded, and explained making the interview process flow organically as a conversation. In essence, semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer the freedom to modify, omit and regulate the questions as the interview develops and gives the interviewer the liberty to inquire beyond the pre-established questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This approach allowed the interviewees to contribute without feeling pressured or questioned and therefore, on many occasions I was able to be more inquisitive about eating patterns and participant meal experiences.

The reason I chose semi-structured interviews to gather data was to allow individuals to provide information and elaborate on their experiences in their own words and views, as every participant experienced the pandemic differently. The interview duration lasted approximately 45-50 minutes per participant to prevent "respondent fatigue" caused by extended interview sessions (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 287). In one case, the interview process lasted 68 minutes as the participant wanted to share more dining experiences and the conversation was

flowing effortlessly. The interviews were conducted and recorded over a 6-week time frame from August to September 2021. After transcription, the respondents were given the opportunity to review and discuss the interview with me. In all cases, participants were satisfied with the interview and didn't share more observations.

Interview Process and Questions

The interview process was conducted in two lengths where consumers were arranged to contribute first, followed by professionals in the second length. Completing the process in two lengths allowed me to review the interview questions and data before reaching the professionals. Thus, enabling me to extract specific restaurant industry information during the second length and address areas that were not well explored. The study's research questions guided the interview questions:

RQ1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out meal experience during the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of ordering food from local independent restaurants during the pandemic?

RQ3: How do consumers compare a take-out gastronomic experience versus dining in a traditional restaurant setting?

In the first length, research participants who identified as consumers were asked questions about their dining experiences in Ottawa. The questions focused on meal experiences before the pandemic, during the pandemic and take-out experiences, as seen in Appendix E.

Leech (2002) writes: "What you want to know determines which questions you will ask. What you already know will determine how you ask them" (p. 665).

Therefore, to make participants comfortable, a series of ice breaker questions were introduced regarding participant take-out tendencies in Ottawa during the pandemic before moving to relevant and critical questions such as grand tour questions. According to Leech (2002), the structure of an interview session should avoid leading or presuming questions but instead use grand tour questions, as seen in Spradley (1979). Grand tour questions allow interviewees and participants to give a verbal tour of an experience from their perspective and encourage respondents to focus their answers on a particular subject while allowing room for discussion (Spradley, 1979, as cited in Leech, 2002). In this study, grand tour questions included dining experiences during the pandemic and focused more on how consumers felt during this time. Consumers could reflect on their experiences and emotions during the pandemic and compare take-out versus restaurant dining experiences. In closing, consumers were asked if they wanted to add anything not covered in the interview process.

In the second length, professionals were interviewed using the same questions to address a consumer's point of view. In every case, each professional was able to provide their perspective and insight allowing more data to be collected. Interviewees required prompting in some instances to provide suitable material for the analysis. Specifically, in some cases, professionals were encouraged to provide their opinion on the current state of the local restaurant scene and its consumers. Leech (2002) describes filler- questions acting as prompts to allow participants to continue explaining their experiences. "Prompts are as important as the questions themselves in semi-structured interviews. Prompts do two things: they keep people talking and they rescue you when responses turn to mush" (Leech, 2002, p.667). Finally, professional

participants were asked to include any concluding thoughts relevant to the study and permission to be contacted if any questions needed to be re-examined.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis (TA) provides a systematic approach to generating codes from the data and categorizing themes and subthemes relevant to the study. Braun and Clarke (2012) wrote, “TA is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis” (p. 57). However, in recent TA overviews, Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that a reflexive TA is theoretically more flexible and can be used within a wide range of theoretical frameworks to determine experiences, human behaviour, views, perceptions, and the factors that influence and shape particular social phenomena. Therefore, in this study, a reflexive TA was preferred to study consumer motivations in procuring take-out meals during COVID-19. According to Braun and Clarke (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2021), a thematic analysis is produced by a series of five successive steps to ensure the correct analysis and coding of the data, which will lead to well thought and accurate findings. I utilized the same principles to allow readers to understand the data in five phases before reaching the sixth phase, writing the report, as per Braun and Clarke’s (2012) TA approach.

Phase One - Familiarization with the data. The first step included transcribing the interviews and making initial notes, either personal thoughts or just reading through the transcripts to understand the participants' descriptions. Interviews were transcribed using 'Otter,' an online tool that analyzed the recordings. Transcribed discussions were printed and categorized between consumers and industry professionals; recurring data were colour-coded while highlighting all quotes, similarities, and contradictions (Clarke & Braun, 2014). I followed a data reliability

strategy by Guest et al. (2012), where the original recordings were compared to transcripts for accuracy and overall understanding. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2012) wrote on the matter of maintaining transcripts in their original form to maintain conversation details "As a general practice, we do not advocate "cleaning up" the transcript (such as making it more grammatical or removing hesitations, pauses, and guggles) when working with data." (p. 60). Therefore, I kept the transcripts unedited to maintain more accuracy with the general mood of the conversations.

Phase Two - Generating Initial Codes. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), phase two includes understanding the data and being critical of the information the data portrays. In this phase, I looked for information that answered my research questions. Any relevant or reoccurring information was paired with a corresponding coloured note and a brief description of the indicated data. In this phase, the goal was to identify patterns common across transcripts or report deviant cases. After generating the first code, I searched for similarities until I found the next relevant topic. Braun and Clarke (2012) explain, "Codes will almost always be a mix of the descriptive and interpretative" (p. 61), which I also soon discovered.

In many cases, the data was descriptive, making coding easy to label and organize. However, on other occasions, data indicated feelings such as anxiety towards dining out or fear of COVID-19. In those cases, I had to write an interpretation of the data content to reveal the meaning.

After processing the transcripts, I gained colour-coded notes for all the data of my research questions which helped me organize the data corpus. Recurring patterns across transcripts included 'Fear of Contracting COVID-19', 'Food quality,' 'Socializing' and 'take-out allows more time for family'. These codes belong to larger theme groups but are connected; they are described in detail in the Findings chapter.

Phase Three - Searching for Themes. This phase explored the relationship between themes and implored me to consider how the data tied into a story or an image while referring to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2012) wrote, "Think of themes like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: Together, they provide a meaningful and lucid picture of your data" (p.65).

Similarly, authors Robson and McCartan (2016) specify an analogous technique to Braun and Clarke's (2012) to identify themes within the data. "In addition to identifying indigenous themes that characterize the experience of informants, your research questions and issues of theoretical importance can be used to suggest possible themes" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 475).

Therefore, considering Braun and Clarke (2012) and Robson and McCartan's (2016) theme identification technique, the initial research questions were a significant starting point to identify themes from the data corpus. Research questions acted as titles on separate sheets of paper where the recurring data were listed beneath each. While many categories were written under the research question titles, data with the highest frequency in appearances from the transcripts quickly stood out; they became the primary coded concepts for the theme, while the rest became secondary, and the ones not mentioned in recurrence were discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Similarly, a frequency number was recorded next to each code, identifying how many times it was mentioned. Data related to each code was then grouped, creating a pattern, thus forming each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012). From there, themes and sub-themes naturally started to overlap and made shared connections where initial signs of patterns among coded data became visible.

Phases Four and Five - Reviewing, Defining and Naming Themes. For these two phases, I checked my themes against data extracts to see if there was reliability. Some codes were

discarded, and others were collated, creating a more prominent body of relevant data. I utilized Braun and Clarke's theme rationale (2012) to establish if a theme has enough supported data and meaningful information to benefit the study's purpose. I also checked for coherence between themes and noted which were significant or not. Finally, for the fifth phase, I started to define the information according to relevance and recorded what was unique about each theme. The themes evolved organically from the data without forcing information to emerge. As Braun and Clarke (2012) explain, "do not try to do too much, as themes should ideally have a singular focus; (b) are related but do not overlap, so they are not repetitive, although they may build on previous themes; and (c) directly address your research question. (p.66)

Finally, I kept relevant participant quotes and each theme's content analysis separately for the final report. The theme analysis was guided by maintaining a relevancy guideline where all data had a purpose and answered the study's research questions as seen in the Findings.

Phase six – Writing the Report. In this phase, I utilized visual mind mapping techniques to make a model for my report, followed by a write-up. In addition, I used notes and memos that were kept throughout the interview and transcription process. Written notes helped identify patterns that wouldn't have been easily visible by only reading through the transcriptions. While writing the report, I followed an organic progression and natural connection of themes related to my research questions to allow the reader to see the relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The report is analyzed in more detail in the next chapter, Findings.

Findings

As discussed in the literature review, restaurant experiences were widely researched before the pandemic in various capacities (Warde & Martens, 2000; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Hansen, 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Taar, 2014). In a study by Hansen (2005), it was found that external factors threaten positive consumer experiences. At the same time, Di Renzo et al. (2020) found the pandemic lifestyle challenging for individuals to adapt to, which interfered with consumer eating habits. For the time being, there is little academic research investigating consumer motivations for take-out experiences during the pandemic. Therefore, this study qualitatively explored consumer motivations for ordering take-out at home during COVID-19 while examining the overall consumer experience.

This study's thematic map derived from the relationship of data emerging from the research questions as seen in Figure 1. Therefore, the findings are organized by consumers and professional participants while using the research questions to categorize the data. In the first half of this chapter consumers compared take-out experiences at home with experiences in restaurant settings and provided their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of those experiences concerning the research questions. In the second half, professionals were asked to provide their view of the industry as well as how they experienced consumer behaviour during COVID-19. Findings from consumers and industry professionals are analyzed in research question succession to allow the reader to follow the interview analysis in a linear approach. To maintain confidentiality and participant anonymity, all participants were given pseudonyms throughout the findings of this research.

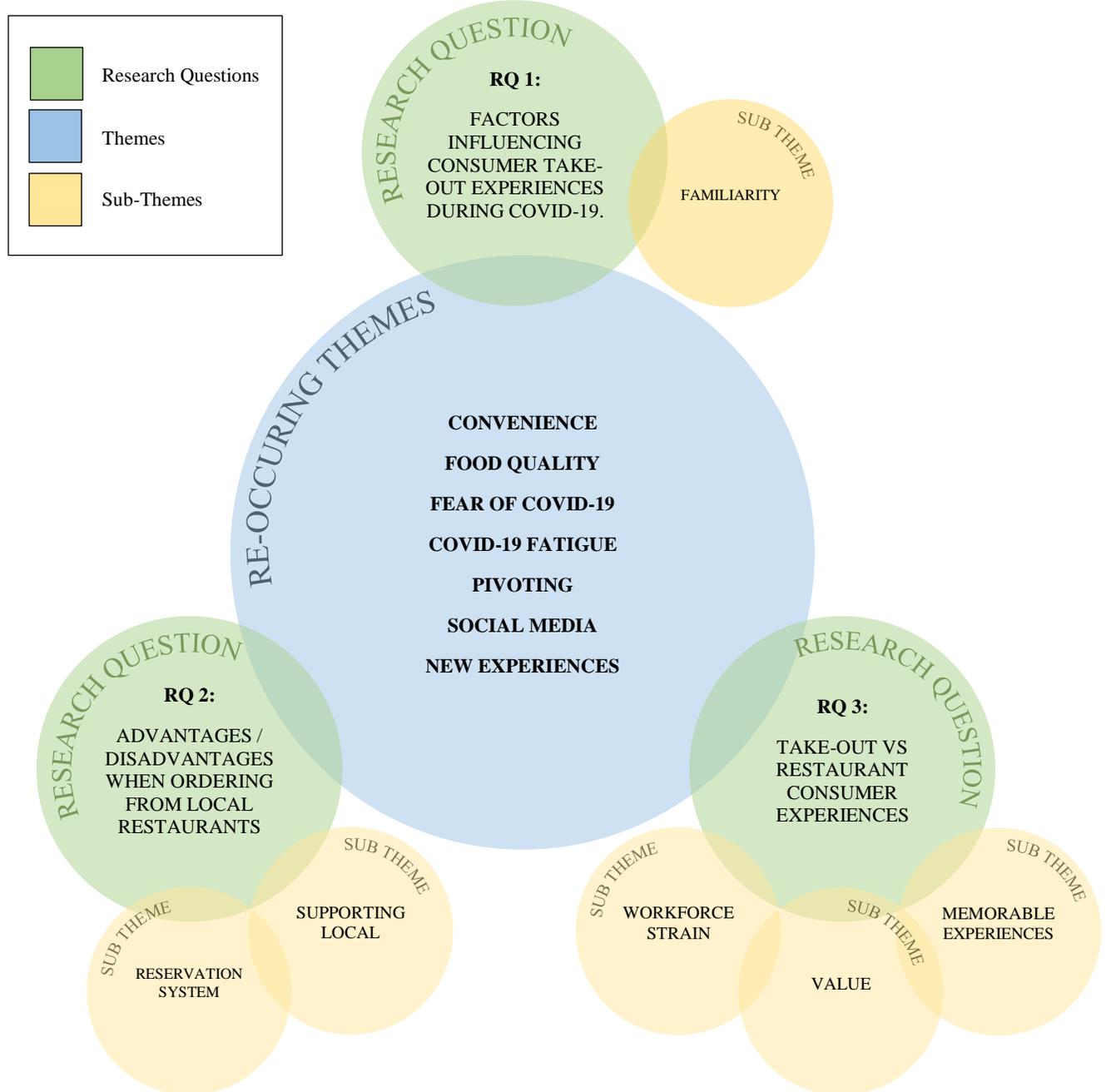
RQ1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out meal experience during the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of ordering food from local independent restaurants during the pandemic?

RQ3: How do consumers compare a take-out gastronomic experience versus dining in a traditional restaurant setting?

Figure 1

Thematic Map



Note. The research questions (RQ) identified in green, are used as a method of identifying themes within the data as per Robson and McCartan (2016). The research questions are linked to the themes that kept re-occurring during the interviews, those are depicted in blue. Last, the major sub themes that hold relevance are indicated in yellow and are connected directly to the analogous research question.

Consumer Participants

Table 1 represents an example of the coded data extracted during the TA, depicted are the Theme descriptions, subthemes and context as discussed in RQ 1.

Table 1

RQ 1: What Factors Influence a Consumer’s Take-Out Experience During the Pandemic?

Code	Example	Description	Sub Theme	Theme
Easy to Order	“I am running from point A to point B and I don’t have the time to cook, So, I’m ordering something to go” (Joanne)	Consumers seek ease and affordability due to life, busy schedules and no time to cook. They want food that is readily available for take-out but also something that feels comforting.	Ordering take-out promotes Familiarity	Convenience
Take-out is comfortable but not for special occasions	“I did not want to be disappointed by something I never tried before, I wanted almost like a home cooked meal” (Damon) “Eating at home took away that celebratory atmosphere ...it just felt like any other dinner” (Tracy)	Consumers felt that eating at home does not fulfill their need to feel treated to dinner thus adding further anxiety while being house bound.	Mental distress and anxiety caused by prolonged isolation.	COVID-19 Fatigue
Participants				
Consumers	Tracy, Damon,			
Professionals	Joanne			

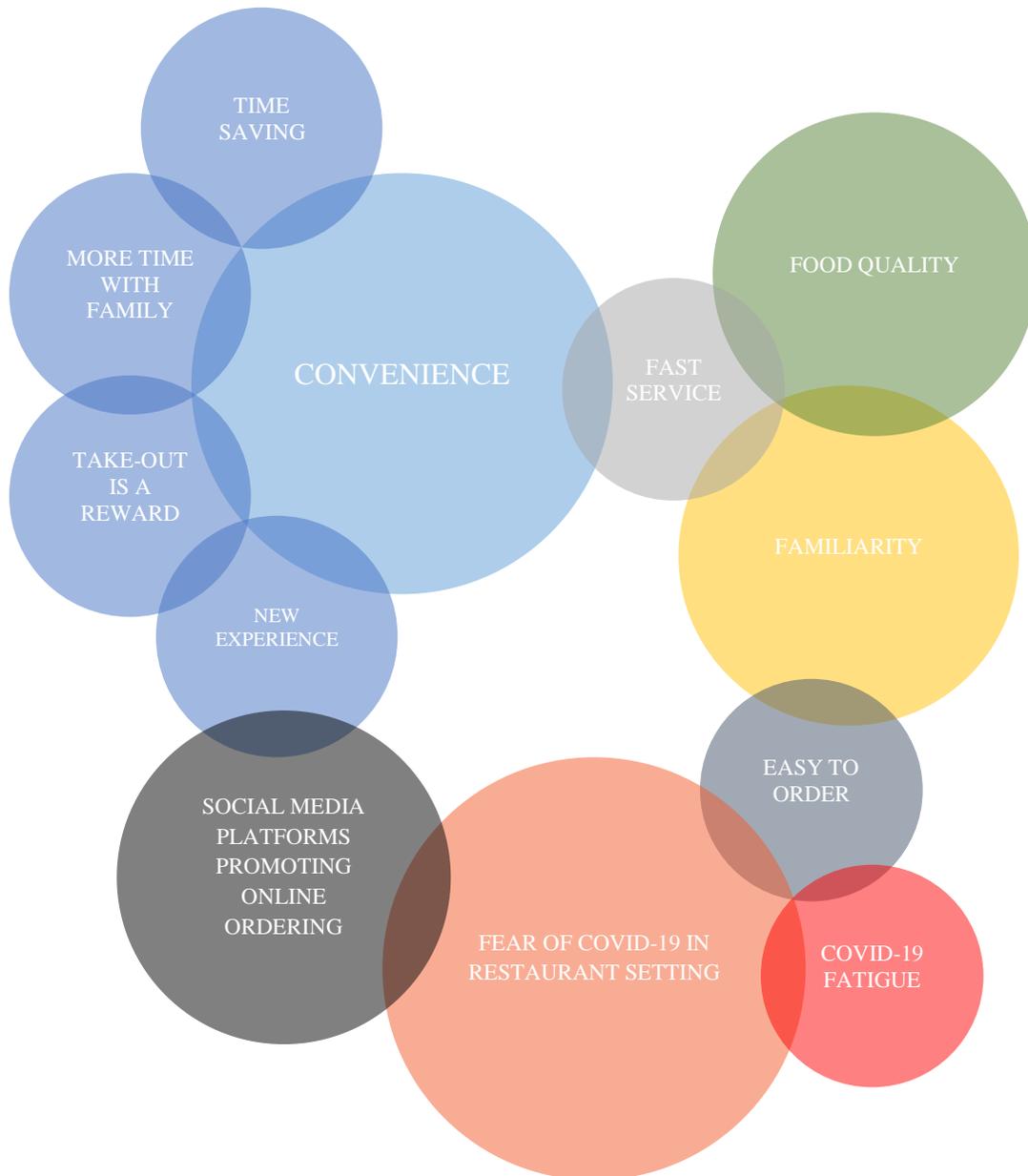
RQ 1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out experience during the pandemic?

Convenience. Before the pandemic, consumers enjoyed eating in a restaurant setting as it was considered fun, allowing people to socialize and relax. Individuals consumed take-out food for convenience rather than pleasure which agrees with past research by Wales (2009); take-out meals were purchased after a busy day at work or when people felt too tired to prepare a homecooked meal as seen in Figure 2. Participants mentioned that eating in a restaurant was an 'occasion' where the consumer could relax as they were being waited on (Norris et al., 2021; Peistikou, 2021). "Monica" explains, "sometimes you want to go to a restaurant to be able to focus on each other and allow somebody else to take care of everything."

Figure 2

Research Question 1: Interview Findings

RQ1: What Factors Influence a Consumer’s Take-out Experience During COVID-19?



Note. Depicted are the emerging themes discussed by all interviewees - professionals, and consumers deriving from research question one. The sizes of the circles represent the frequency they were mentioned during the interview process. The areas where the bubbles join are also of importance as it indicates how factors related to one another.

Most consumer interviewees expressed that ordering and consuming a take-out meal is regarded as a relaxing and socializing activity. "Monica" related that take-out experiences during the pandemic are more convenient, personal, and intimate. Being at home made consumers feel comfortable with having alcoholic beverages as opposed to being in a restaurant setting where they would have to be mindful of the amount they drink, make driving arrangements as well as be aware of the limited seating time. Participants said that COVID-19 had brought more stress in their lives due to changes in their work and life balance (Di Renzo et al. 2020), and take-out meals alleviated the obligation of cooking, thus supporting the idea of convenience.

During the interviews, meals at home were described as time-efficient and convenient. Consumers explained their preference for take-out as they didn't have to worry about cooking. Participants "Alex" and "Derek" explained that time was 'valuable'; therefore, if a day was planned with activities, they felt disheartened by having to cook afterwards. Instead, they ordered from Uber Eats or Skip the dishes for convenience and ease (Grande, 2020). Consumers viewed take-out meal experiences as a time-saving commodity enabling them to allocate time for other activities. Norris et al. (2021) and Grande (2020) described online platforms such as Skip the Dishes and Uber Eats as practical meal procuring tools allowing people to be more productive instead of preparing a meal.

Pivoting and Social Media. The term 'pivoting' was mentioned and discussed organically in the interviews as all consumers were cognizant of what it meant but were more concerned with how restaurants dealt with closures (Cooper, 2020; Guillen, 2020; Peistikou, 2021). In fact, many participants explained the reason they supported independent restaurants more than franchises was because of the local industry's effort to serve consumers with fresh,

affordable, and locally made food during months of restrictions and isolation. The sub-theme “Pivoting” is directly related to “Social Media” as consumers relied on social media to see if a restaurant was still operational and depended on their online presence to determine if a restaurant is worth trying (Grande, 2020). Social media became more than a mindless scrolling tool for bored users, consumers depended on social media platforms to stay connected with people they knew and utilized platforms to learn new activities and, among other things, devoted time to baking or cooking to pass the time (Chang & Meyerhoefer, 2020). According to participants, social media accounts showcasing food became a daily necessity for inspiration and browsing restaurant menus. Food blogger “Amanda” explained that she gained new followers who were eagerly looking for the next great take-out experience. “If we know there is a new restaurant in town and there is buzz about it on Instagram, then yeah, we will check it out.” In the same way, other participants agreed with what is already known, social media is a primary factor for ordering take-out from a new independent restaurants in Ottawa or the next ‘new place’ in town (Restaurants Canada, 2021a). Other interviewees attested to social media becoming an enabler for consumers to discover new restaurant experiences during the pandemic.

Fear of COVID-19. Restaurants had adopted a vaccination policy where consumers were required to show proof of vaccination to be allowed to dine in restaurants throughout the pandemic (Walkowiak et al., 2021). Some interviewees explained that even though they felt relief for compulsory vaccination policies, they were still cautious about contracting the virus. Others indicated that the experience is not worth the risk, "Tracy" said:

I am double vaccinated, but I still fear. It matters to me; health and safety matter to me. I don't think I'd be comfortable anytime soon going to a place where I'm like jammed in; I do enjoy the spacing.

Participant "Monica" explained that in terms of convenience and ease, staying at home was a critical factor for adopting more take-out experiences since there was a general fear of contracting COVID-19 when visiting a limited capacity restaurant. In addition, several consumers indicated that even though restaurants try to maintain sanitation processes, some don't adhere to strict COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Food Quality. Consumers expressed that restaurant prepared take-out food had a certain allure compared to home-cooked meals making the overall experience similar to that of being in a restaurant setting, a concept also covered in previous studies (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Gustafsson et al., 2006). "Holly," remarked, "I'm not a very good cook. So, yeah, it's nice to have good food, you know?". Quality was a non-negotiable factor for re-ordering take-out food (Di Renzo et al., 2020). In many cases, quality was why participants stopped ordering from certain independent restaurants. Study participants observed the difference in quality of their delivered food in comparison to their pre-pandemic take-out orders (Di Renzo et al., 2020). The principal reason for that lies in the receiver's experience (Ha & Jang, 2010), "Amanda" expressed relief as food experiences during the pandemic were more cost-effective which added to the experience even though the quality wasn't the same "I definitely missed eating at restaurants, but my wallet is also happier. We don't pay for service charges anymore".

Some participants expressed eagerness for the industry to re-open as take-out did not adhere to the same quality standards as a meal eaten in a restaurant (Cotnam, 2021). "Amanda"

specified that initial take-out experiences were not of the expected quality a consumer would usually see in a restaurant setting; instead, take-out felt like a compromise. Specifically, "Amanda," said:

The first experience that we had wasn't the greatest, like, the burger was soggy, and the fries were soggy. You're missing the freshness element of it, but it was still nice to be like, 'oh, we didn't cook this meal,' you know? We don't have to like, plan this meal out and buy the groceries – it just came to our doorstep.

Consumer "Angela" explained, "I just don't find food quality as good as in independent restaurants." Participants indicated that independent restaurants have put more care into preparing meals than chains allowing the consumer to feel they are getting value for the money spent.

COVID-19 Fatigue. During the early phases of the pandemic in 2020, people faced seclusion, they were restricted from socializing and prohibited from being in closed public spaces with others when unnecessary (Goddard, 2020). The prolonged lifestyle changes and routine dissolution forced people to find alternative paths towards maintaining aspects of pre-pandemic life (Di Renzo et al., 2021). Many individuals struggled with mental stress, depression and anxiety as residents struggled with the new normality (Di Renzo et al., 2021). As restaurants continued closing, more workers were laid off, and the restaurant industry was best described by uncertainty for the future (Bufquin et al., 2021).

For communities in Ottawa, while being homebound was non-negotiable due to government restrictions, take-out and delivered foods were the only familiar sources for residents as in pre-covid times. When extreme stress is introduced, people seek ordinary things to receive

comfort. A study in Qatar by Ben Hassen et al. (2020) concurs that consumer behaviour drastically changes in times of difficulty.

Usually, the purchase of products is utilized as a relaxation medium to cope with distress. However, there is also evidence that this focus on buying food items is a behavioural reaction to feelings of stress and uncertainty. A perceived loss of control is a disagreeable state that leads consumers to restore control through product acquisition. (Ben Hassen et al., 2020, p.3)

In this study, take-out became a source of comfort since it was the only unaltered restaurant service during the pandemic. Take-out provided consumers with a dining experience at home while helping them put aside the fear of contracting COVID-19 (Kim & Lee, 2020). Ordering a meal became an occasion and something consumers looked forward to. Consumer "Damon" indicated that take-out meals alleviated anxiety and stress as individuals didn't have to focus on daily meal preparations.

In terms of feeling fatigued, consumers expressed their disappointment for not celebrating, socializing, or commemorating special holidays and events and revealed a general feeling of exhaustion for the current COVID-19 safety restrictions. "Holly" explained, "...as some of us got vaccinated, we were able to get together, you know, outside, but it wasn't the same thing...So, you know it's not the same feel or that celebratory feeling". Consumer 'Damon' explained:

... the only time you were allowed to leave your house was for groceries, medical, or food. And so, as an excuse we used to go out for a drive, you know to see somebody and say hello, or whatever and have some kind of human contact.

Several consumers reminisced the idea of walking into a restaurant, ordering a meal and having the option or the freedom to dine-in or take-out. Participants were irritated for the lack of dining options, where the only alternatives were delivery or cooking a meal thus, making them feel restricted. Most individuals expressed they were eager to dine in a restaurant setting again after COVID-19 because it was a familiar activity – supporting the idea that sitting in a restaurant promotes a sense of normalcy; it's not about the food only – as Hansen (2005) and Ha (2020) explain - it's the atmosphere and the overall experience.

New Experiences. Meals are a necessary part of society where individuals can connect, relax, and enjoy an experience (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). While for some participants ordering take-out remained a factor of convenience just as in pre-pandemic times, others attested that take-out was a reason to try something new. Specifically, participant "Derek" explained, "The main thing would honestly be, I don't cook. Like I cook very healthy at home. So, honestly, it's like a cheat meal; if anything, it's a treat."

In restaurants, patrons go for the experience; they will get dressed for the occasion as they look forward to being greeted, seated, served, and then go home without cleaning (Hansen, 2005). "Holly" explained how she missed being waited and served but didn't have that luxury at home "...somebody has to cook, and somebody has to do all the dishes". However, other conversations with interviewees indicated underlying reasons for preferring take-out over cooking at home or eating in a restaurant during the pandemic. Eating in a restaurant may be

“expensive,” “time-consuming,” and the consumer needs to be mindful of leaving the right amount of gratuities to servers. Participants indicated that take-out is more than just convenience but is a lifestyle choice and a new habit assimilated when families had no choice but to spend more time together around the table. "Jake" explained that the pandemic did not affect him and his family whatsoever, as they substituted restaurant experiences with take-out at home – and it felt equally nice for them, if not better than dining in a loud, fast paced environment. In contrast, a minority of participants expressed how the pandemic made them feel alienated from society and alone since they couldn't freely visit and dine in restaurants making take-out feel like a forced experience.

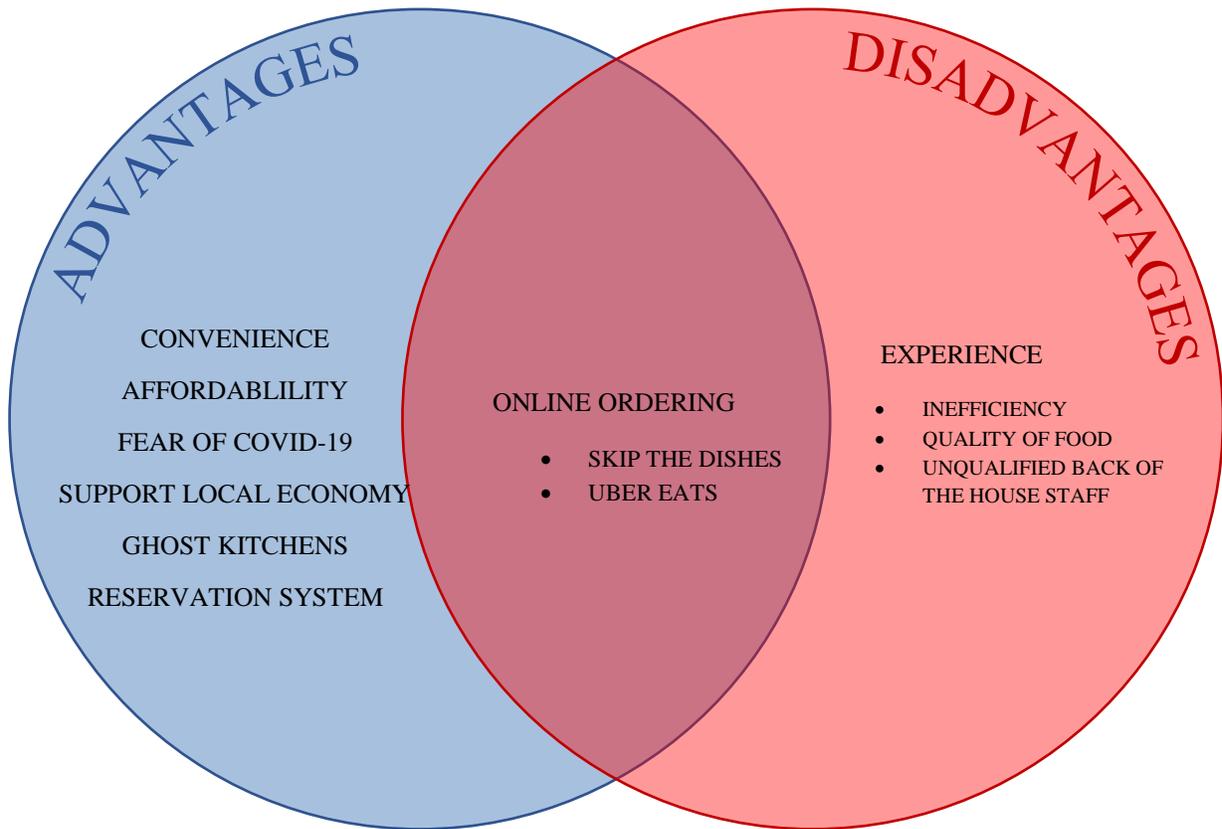
RQ 2: What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ordering Food from Local Independent Restaurants During COVID-19?

To provide a more organised approach this research question was written in two separate sections advantages and disadvantages for consumers and professional participants, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Research Question 2: Interview Findings

RQ2: What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ordering Food from Local Independent Restaurants during COVID-19?



Note. The blue circle indicates the advantages consumers and professionals have considered when ordering food from local independent restaurants. Similarly, the orange circle indicates disadvantages. In addition, online ordering has positive and negative qualities according to professionals and consumers alike and therefore, occupies a common ground where advantages and disadvantages meet.

Advantages for Consumers.

Convenience. Participants described local restaurant take-out as "easy" and "affordable" compared to dining in a restaurant as service charges inadvertently made a meal more expensive, thus interfering with the overall experience. While participants were happy to pay gratuities, they sometimes felt pressured. Therefore, take-out alleviated that anxiety. Consumer "Monica" described lack of motivation being another reason for ordering take-out for her family. "Sometimes you just don't feel like cooking. It could be a hard day at work, your brain is drained, and you don't want to go to the stove. You want to grab something easy, convenient". In addition, consumers were asked why they chose independent restaurants for something convenient, to which the majority explained that the food tasted similar to home-cooked meals.

Supporting Local. An unexpected topic emerged as an advantage for ordering take-out, which included the idea of "supporting local" businesses. Participants were cognizant of the local market's financial troubles due to limited operations during the pandemic and opted to support local independent businesses instead of franchises. Consumers "Derek" and "Alex" agreed that restaurants became more creative by introducing new ideas and product lines in a noble effort to retain and acquire more clientele. Specifically, "Derek" said, "I feel like they kept the quality the same; they are working hard and definitely struggling, but that's why I want to support local." "Alex" shared her view, "the chains didn't change much; it's not about quality for them, it's about pumping out quantity. COVID-19 has limited their ability to do everything, and I felt like the local places have done the opposite".

While for some consumers ordering take-out was about value, comfort and efficiency, other participants explained supporting local businesses gave them a sense of pride in helping the

industry. Some participants expressed disapproval with buying meals from franchises as that would hinder the local economy. "Amanda" explained, "We started to do take-out more often. Trying to help local businesses because we heard that some restaurants were going out of business". Furthermore, "Damon" and "Angela" pointed out the importance of supporting pivoting businesses during the pandemic because restaurants have put more effort into their services and products than in pre-pandemic times. An example of the coded data can be seen in Table 2 along with a description of the emerging theme and subtheme.

Table 2

RQ 2: What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ordering from Local Independent Restaurants During COVID-19?

Code	Example	Description	Subtheme	Theme
Change in Routine	"I'll call or go online, it'll say "oh, sorry we are booked" and I'm like well, there go our plans!" (Jake)	Booking a reservation in a restaurant is hard because of restrictions and limited seating.	Reservation System - Disadvantage – experience in restaurants is not the same as pre-pandemic times	Convenience
Trying New Take-out Food	"I enjoy having a meal delivered and I want to support small businesses during COVID, I just like trying different things" (Tracy)	Consumers indicated that restaurants offering new meal specials and offers helped them overcome being housebound, while helped expose consumers to new experiences	Supporting Local	Pivoting
Participants				
Consumers	Jake, Tracy			

Disadvantages for Consumers

Food Quality. The concept of food quality was consistent throughout the interviews. Frequent diners expressed that food prepared in a restaurant was meant to be consumed in a restaurant setting, and therefore, take-out meal quality was inferior. According to some consumers – food arrived overcooked, stale and sometimes not as advertised. Similarly, Ha and Jang (2010) explained that take-out is a good alternative, but it cannot replicate restaurant quality or overall experience. A few consumers disagreed while explaining that independent restaurants chose convenience rather than quality specifically ‘Derek’ explained:

Either the Chefs or the original staff is not there anymore, maybe because of how long things were closed? Or they didn’t have much staff- so they are overworked or overwhelmed, I’m not entirely sure, but I have noticed a very big drop in quality of take-out food and even good restaurants in general since COVID-19.

Participant Alex’ explained, “I’ve already crossed off a whole bunch of places on my list, you know, really shortening it down to who’s got quality take-out food.” Some consumers stopped ordering take-out or visiting specific restaurants due to poor food quality. While some preferred franchises for their product consistency, others disagreed and explained that local restaurants maintained food quality in comparison to chains because they employ trained cooks and industry Chefs.

RQ 3: How do Consumers Compare a Take-Out Experience Versus Dining in a Traditional Restaurant Setting?

Restaurant outings were synonymous with occasions, events or having new experiences by trying something new. Current restrictions and government mandates forced restaurants to

operate at a reduced capacity while allowing take-out to be the predominant option for patrons (Ha, 2020; Peistikou, 2021). Interviewees have indicated how they perceived take-out meal experiences during the pandemic in comparison to visiting restaurants in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Research Question 3: Interview Results

RQ3: How do Consumers Compare a Take-out Experience Versus Dining in a Traditional

	TAKE-OUT	RESTAURANT
POSITIVE	NEW EXPERIENCE SKIP / UBER CONVENIENCE VALUE	MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE NEW EXPERIENCE VALUE FOOD QUALITY
NEGATIVE	INNEFFICIENCIES SKIP / UBER COVID- 19 FATIGUE	FEAR OF COVID-19 RESERVATION SYSTEM WORKFORCE STRAIN

Note. This diagram depicts a comparison between take-out experiences and restaurant experiences along with positive and negative values for each theme and sub-theme indicated during interviews with participants in this study.

Convenience. As businesses were open during decreased restrictions, capacity stipulations in restaurants made people re-think the notion of dining out. The government implemented reservation systems in restaurants to maintain specific clientele volumes for safety reasons (Bufquin et al., 2021). Consumers were expected to book their intended dining occasion in advance but with limited seating arrangements it became a challenge for businesses and consumers. Even though all consumers and professionals agreed with vaccination policies some indicated that dining out had become a lengthy process. Eating in a restaurant was influenced by mandates such as wearing a mask and being vaccinated to dine indoors, which altered the overall dining experience. Similarly, seated consumers faced anxiety as their booking had a specific time cap for safety reasons. "Derek" explains:

It was very frustrating to find a spot to go to; you can't just do things on the fly anymore.

Or when you're thinking, 'Oh, I'm here for 90 minutes; I got to leave now!' And that definitely puts a damper on things for sure.

Consumers mentioned that reservations were hard to book because of restaurants' limited seating policy, thus amplifying their motivation towards ordering more take-out during the pandemic. Some described the transition from dining out to ordering take-out as easy and convenient as they didn't have to leave the house or plan ahead. However, other consumers explained that being in lockdown during the pandemic was a reason for them to replicate a restaurant experience at home. An example of the emerging theme, subtheme and coded data is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3

RQ 3: How do Consumers Compare a Take-Out Experience versus Dining in a Traditional restaurant Setting?

Code	Example	Description	Subtheme	Theme
Eating out is an Occasion but take-out can be both	<p>“The food has to be good, and the service has to be good, but really it’s the overall experience – I would say value for money, a good product and good service is paramount to the experience” (Angela)</p> <p>“it’s kind of adding something to the day, because it’s something exciting and fun. We don’t want to take the time at home to finish off the day with cooking, so, take-out allows us to extend that fun” (Alex)</p> <p>“rather than having to cook everything, we would focus on setting our own atmosphere at home and then the take out comes and we can enjoy our company and all the fun stuff... like we actually had a better time doing take-out at home than it has been now going to restaurants” (Derek)</p>	<p>Consumers explained the difference between eating out and dining in.</p> <p>Consumers explained that eating in a restaurant was for occasions whereas eating take out was more convenient and a reason to create more memorable moments</p>	Memorable Experience	Convenience
<hr/>				
Participants				
Consumers	Angela, Derek, Alex,			

Professional Participants

RQ 1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out experience during the pandemic?

Convenience. Ordering a meal was motivating because it was delivered to the consumer's home. Industry chef "Antonio" said, "I think they like to order take-out; I think sometimes it's just the easiness of having that, you know, delivered to your home. Especially if you have a long day at work." In the same mind-frame, participants explain how they enjoy eating a well-prepared meal and, therefore, may often order take-out from independent restaurants (Grande, 2020). Professional "Amy" explained ordering takeaway meals promotes comfort since patrons are not obligated to dress for the occasion. Take-out is considered easy, no mess and hassle-free, but at the same time, consumers benefit from having a positive experience in a familiar atmosphere- such as their home.

Pivoting and Social Media. In a matter of months, companies drastically changed their customer retention and acquisition methods. Social media and meal procurement platforms such as Skip the Dishes or Uber-Eats became significant factors in helping overcome hardship as restaurants advertised and promoted offerings to maintain clientele (Mohammed, 2020). However, professionals indicated that a business owner's role was far more complicated during the pandemic in comparison to pre-pandemic eras, as "Matthias" explained:

So now we have to play, like, create and have a following of friends. The whole social media thing is important, staying connected with clients giving them something new to see and interact with on a weekly basis. You need to be more connected with the customer than just keeping a pretty website.

While consumers saw merit in using meal procurement platforms, professional interviewees disapproved of media such as Skip the Dishes and Uber. "Mark" conveyed that those conglomerate companies charged excruciatingly pricey fees for their services to local restaurants. "As far as the restaurant itself, well- after the third-party companies' surcharge, there isn't much profit left for the independent owner." Some consumer participants also noted that they prefer placing orders directly to the restaurant to avoid supporting third party companies. On the other end, Diebner et al. (2020) explained that some restaurants felt obligated to join those platforms to keep the consumer happy as they were established and recognized for their convenient delivery service.

Workforce Strain. Professionals noticed a phenomenon where poor customer service and restaurant food quality were directly related to the loss of qualified staff due to the pandemic. Professional "Amy" explains that up until the pandemic, restaurants were paying their staff minimum wage for their hard labour; it was accepted within the industry as that was the status quo. However, as COVID-19 hit the sector, many professionals left the industry, searching for other, higher-paying jobs (Bufquin et al., 2021). According to "Pete," local restaurants were forced to work with primarily unqualified staff willing to receive minimum wages and long hours. Other business owners weren't so lucky; business owner "Mark" explained that COVID-19 devastated his business within hours of receiving the local mandates and restrictions. His staff had to be laid off, and he eventually used his savings to keep the company afloat. Like "Mark," kitchens and restaurants had no opportunities for professionals and Chefs, leaving many workers no choice but to change industries for better wages (Bufquin et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2021b). "Mark" explained:

You know, like I have colleagues who were like executive Chefs in massive banquet facilities who are like, wondering if they are going to be able to make a mortgage payment next month.... I saw giants in the industry just f***** crumble and be like, I don't know what I'm going to do. I think businesses that continue to operate are probably doing it by the skin of their teeth.

In his interview "Pete" explained, "Right, no one's making money, even the busy patios, they are just trying to keep staff." Supporting "Mark's" previous statement, "Pete" also acknowledged that along with businesses pivoting to remain operational many lost their jobs – including himself. His company went bankrupt due to not being able to pivot the business model into a ghost kitchen operation, where the kitchen could remain operational without seating or waitstaff but with delivery and take-out options instead (See-Kwong, Soo-Ryue, Shiun-Yi & Chong, 2017; Panse et al., 2019; Chauhan, Abidi, Joshi & Kumar, 2020; Peistikou, 2021). On the other end, according to "Matthias" and "Mark," the pandemic made consumers forget how to act in public. According to professionals, many consumers treat food service staff poorly during restaurant encounters, leading to more frustration for workers and forcing them to leave the food service industry.

Fear of COVID-19. On the other end, professionals explained that even though consumers feared contracting COVID-19, people grew restless at home and wanted to dine out by any means necessary (Di Renzo et al., 2020). Consumers expressed the need to socialize and seek experiences similar to pre-pandemic times. However, at the same time, take-out has become a safer experience than eating in a restaurant. Professional "Amy" explained:

I'm someone who would go to a patio, and I haven't quite gotten into the dining indoors scene yet; I'm still quite uncomfortable on the patios. But um, yeah, I suppose you'd also have to dress for the elements, whereas take-out you're just, you have a bit more flexibility in terms of where you eat it.

Other interviewees also felt apprehensive about having a patio experience and explained that they'd rather wait until public spaces felt safer.

Food Quality. Certain restaurants were forced to make drastic menu changes. Industry expert "Matthias" related that restaurants had to cut their food costs; therefore, their quality has changed. In addition, many accommodations were made to reduce labour costs, which came at the expense of food quality.

Okay, so we are more accommodating now because we realize, you know we need the people, we need hands - or if I am less reliable on people can I still put a product out? So maybe I should buy all my pastries, ready to serve. Okay, then maybe I can buy all my breads as a bake-off item – people still love good bread – but I can't afford a pastry Chef.

Professionals explained that even though businesses tried to be accommodating – some consumers felt unsatisfied with restaurant food value and quality.

COVID-19 Fatigue. The pandemic forced consumers to realize the importance of social contact, professionals "Amy," "Tanya," and "Pete" relayed that the pandemic has made consumers yearn to be outside or connected with people as they experience loneliness from being isolated, therefore having a meal together is the first sought out social experience. However, "Joanne" mentioned that from her experience, single consumers are not motivated to cook as

much as before, making takeaway meals more favourable, as also supported in Brown et al., (2020). "Joanne" continues by saying that COVID-19 has generated anxiety and mental distress, thus, making a take-out meal easier to procure than cooking at home for various reasons. The concept of "take-out" was considered an amalgamation of thoughts and actions, such as a convenient, easy, fun pastime activity that her family looked forward to having.

When we went into the initial lockdown, any consumer that was looking for that fun, that party, they were told 'no it's not happening'.... after that people started to get the itch, even if it was to go to a drive through. They were leaving their homes, or they were now calling Uber to come and bring them something.

The pandemic has highlighted how important it is to have meals with family and friends; sharing food is an intimate and personal thing that allows people to connect and combat isolation (Brown et al., 2020). Similarly, when asked why consumers order take-out, "Joanne" explained:

Convenience would be the number one factor consumers are looking for, the quick, easy fix because they are so busy because they are tied down with things, they just can't get away from. And when you look at the pandemic, it's as if I am now lazy. I'm sitting in my house; I don't want to go out. I've been hit with this; I've been forced to stay at home. So, I just don't want to do anything.

Previous studies support that forced feelings of isolation promote a sense of helplessness, which people try to combat by consuming food and having meal experiences (Spinelli, 2014; Di Renzo et al., 2020). Similarly, "Amy" explained:

There's an area of research now called commonality, this idea of sharing at the table and how that's important throughout history but also in terms of mental health and wellbeing; you know, being able to kind of break bread, so to speak, is a very old, historical thing. And the pandemic, I think, has challenged a lot of us in that sense, you know, just to kind of suddenly be in isolation or if you live alone.

Professionals indicated that take-out was something special, out of the ordinary and offered a different experience for residents stuck at home. In addition, take-out experiences were valued more than their ease and affordability; they promoted comfort as a way for consumers to sit back, relax and allow someone else to do the cooking. Professionals expressed how the pandemic created an opportunity to observe consumer behaviour and eating habits as businesses developed "outside-of-the-box" ideas to promote their products and services, a notion also supported in Diebner et al., (2020). "Amy" explained that some restaurants recognized the need in the market for dining experiences and created new concepts such as a picnic or charcuterie takeaway options.

New Experiences. Professionals see meals beyond the scope of an experience; among others, "Tanya" explains that a meal is "one of the most important things; it's the center of culture." Meals are fundamentally essential experiences that shape culture, promote conversation and build social rapport, as supported by previous studies (Taar, 2014). Beyond that premise, "Amy" explained:

It also, I think, shapes your identity as well as part of who you are. I think a lot of what you eat is also who you are; you know, you express a lot of your identity and cultural identity or even just the way you socialize and express yourself through your food.

The pandemic has really made people realize how to reprioritize as well as, you know, what's important. I think experiences have become more important than things; you know, just buying more things. Like I think food is an experience.

According to "Matthias," take-out has changed how consumers view a dining experience as comfort feels essential rather than in pre-pandemic times "Now, you can basically get in your PJ's and eat pizza in front of your television; you know, it's not a big production." While consumers miss dining out, professionals explained that take-out is the new normality as priorities have shifted and consumers have found ways to make take-out meals an occasion.

RQ 2: What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ordering Food From Local Independent Restaurants During COVID-19?

Advantages.

Pivoting. Restaurants had to become creative with their take-out menus while remaining competitive with franchises through creating inexpensive meal options. Industry professional "Matthias" explained, "Take-out is a good thing for a business to have if the business can keep it affordable - because they are competing with the Pizza-Pizzas." In addition, "Matthias" explained how take-out is an advantage for both consumer and the business:

For about 40 bucks, you have a nice dinner for two people, you don't have to pay a service charge, you can drink your wine or beer – and then you can try it again with a couple of friends. Take-out is here to stay because it is affordable it's flexible, and you can have it quickly. You either order it, pick it up or have it delivered – you don't spend two hours in a restaurant.

From the business's point of view, many restaurants saw take-out as an opportunity to pivot that allowed them to have fewer running costs. The concept of not needing front-of-the-house staff meant reduced labour for the business. At the same time, a significant advantage mentioned throughout the interviews proposed that take-out enabled companies to remain operational during COVID-19.

Reservation System. On the other end, professionals explained that the reservation system implemented by the government for local restaurants had pushed consumers toward ordering more take-out. "Amy" describes the everyday experience for consumers trying to dine in a restaurant as stressful, and a decision worth planning in advance:

And once you get your table, I know some restaurants have requested that you limit it to one hour and a half just so that they can try to get in as many people in. So, you know, you have to bear in mind that you can't maybe linger as much as you'd like, you know, so yeah, it's sort of planning a bit more. Whereas with take-out, it's a bit more casual. It's a bit more relaxed, in your home, your environment.

For the consumer, the intention of planning, booking a table and going to a restaurant is no longer worth the same value as the amount of time spent to place an order and have a meal at home. "Amy," says:

You know, now that patios are open, you have to make sure you book well in advance; they all book up really fast. Meals can no longer feel fun because they lack spontaneity, and people feel frustrated by not being able to just go for dinner.

While the reservation system is inconvenient for many consumers, it is still an option for restaurants to serve their patrons. As professionals explained, the reservation system is a disadvantage for the local restaurant industry as it hinders consumer experience, but it has enabled consumers to order more take-out food from local restaurants.

Supporting Local. Professionals agreed that take-out during the pandemic had educated consumers to be more aware and knowledgeable about ordering and consuming products while becoming significantly more adventurous and trying new things, as Ha (2020) mentioned. Awareness on local television channels helped consumers realize the industry's peril and its workers when businesses don't have demand. Consumers were eager to support the local sector stay afloat by ordering meals from independent restaurants for either curbside pick-up or delivery; "this idea of curbside pick-up, I think, has really changed the way that you interact with the client. Just getting stuff in the mail has totally changed things, stuff they would never order". On a broader level, "Mark" explained that consumers were more open to various delivery methods even if they weren't using them before the pandemic. While the pandemic fast-tracked how consumers interacted with food applications, Ottawa residents felt compelled to endorse local restaurants by purchasing take-out.

Disadvantages.

COVID-19 Fatigue. Even though consumers with families explained that their dining experiences were substituted by take-out without many consequences; however, professionals explained that solely ordering take-out had disadvantages for individuals living alone. People who lived alone and were confined in their space couldn't socialize, thence experiencing feelings of isolation, loneliness, worry, and mental distress.

Food Quality. On similar matters, professionals discussed industry inefficiencies that were not present before the pandemic. Specifically, franchises gained popularity during the pandemic due to their quality control and time efficiency in comparison to local independent restaurants, "Matthias" explained:

Independent restaurants have been inconsistent during COVID-19. They are focused on keeping the customer happy- but it's their perception of what makes the customer happy. In reality, they harm the business's bottom line because they are inconsistent with their product and timing.

"Matthias" and other professionals explained that inefficiencies are directly related to poor food production deriving from unqualified staff working in kitchens during the pandemic or even a lack of willing staff. Since the initial worker lay-offs in the first few months of restrictions, restaurants relied on limited government subsidies (Larue, 2020). However, economic assistance wasn't enough to keep many workers employed in restaurants. Most professional interviewees explained that qualified staff was hard to find, and businesses had no choice but to train anyone willing to work - inadvertently sacrificing food quality. Professionals expressed that a loss of balance between food quality and time efficiency was detrimental to a business during the pandemic.

RQ 3: How do Consumers Compare a Take-Out Experience Versus Dining in a Traditional Restaurant Setting?

Memorable Experience. According to professionals, dining promotes conversation and community, allowing people to share an experience, thus making it memorable. In the literature review, Gregorash (2018) covers the construct of memorable experiences heightened by food

experiences. The findings of this study agree with previous research describing dining in a restaurant as an orchestrated play, where the consumer is the guest of honour who participates in a unique sensory experience involving an interplay of taste, smells, atmosphere, and human contact (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). Industry chef "Antonio" said:

I think it's a show, everything when dining in a restaurant is theatre, from the moment you walk in, you know? How the place looks, the lighting, the music, the cleanliness, how you are greeted at the door, how soon the waiter will bring me a glass of water before explaining what is offered. From the moment you walk into the restaurant – to the moment you leave, it's an experience like going to a ballet – or going to a theatre.

Value. According to professional interviewees, consumers reminisced about being served in restaurants during the pandemic and realized that take-out could also be an experience – at home. Chef “Antonio” points out that the pandemic created an opportunity while enabling consumers to understand and appreciate ingredients and processes more – hence why many consumers started baking sourdough bread and discovering cooking tips on social media during the first year of the pandemic. According to professionals, consumers perceive take-out as less costly to eat than dining in restaurants, and consumers seem willing to replicate a dining experience at home.

Similarly, restaurateurs realised they needed to deliver accommodating experiences to target their market, such as different menus, adding services to gain a broader range of clientele and expanding their social media and internet presence. Pivoting businesses and ghost kitchens decided to eliminate the seated area of their business to save labour costs, thus allowing businesses to operate through take-out and affirming previous industry research (King, 2020;

Larue, 2020). Throughout this study, professionals pinpointed that take-out during the pandemic was seen as a new and unique experience compared to pre-pandemic take-out. Social media helped create this new take-out image. “Bella,” “Joanne,” and “Matthias” explained that consumers frequently ordered during the pandemic because take-out felt like a valuable amenity. “Antonio” specified:

I have friends that used to order once or twice a week. Now, they call four times a week because excellent restaurants in Ottawa deliver a packaged experience that you could have in a restaurant- at half the price. Check the restaurant’s post on Instagram and see what they offer!

Finally, professionals described the local restaurant industry during COVID-19 as a rapidly evolving sector where the business owner mentality is more creative and strives to become innovative. Restaurateurs didn’t hesitate to develop, improve or change offerings as the goal was sustainability – unconsciously increasing value for consumers.

Discussion

The purpose of this research aimed to determine if COVID-19 was the reason for homebound consumers in Ottawa inheriting take-out at home as new dining experiences. This project acknowledged recent studies demonstrating the critical effect pandemic restrictions had on home-confined consumers by Di Renzo et al. (2020); online food demand by Chang and Meyerhoefer (2020); mental wellness by Bufquin et al. (2021); restaurant industry challenges by Norris et al., (2021) and Peistikou (2021). For comparison, this study utilized previous research by scholars who studied optimal meal experiences, memorable dining experiences, food quality,

consumer behaviour, motivation and revisitation (Jarvis, 1987; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Hansen, 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Ha & Jang, 2010; Taar, 2014; Chen, 2018; Gregorash, 2018; Ha, 2020). Through information retrieval from consumers and industry professionals, this research attempted to examine meal experiences during COVID-19 and concluded the following results.

RQ 1: What factors influence a consumer's take-out experience during the pandemic?

COVID-19 was a critical factor in keeping consumers homebound. However, consumers expressed that take-out experiences were convenient, easy, and safer than dining in limited capacity restaurants during restrictions. Thus, a domino effect occurred where consumers felt safer at home; therefore, they ordered meals through online webpages, applications, and third-party distribution platforms. Most consumers utilized delivery applications such as Skip the Dishes and Uber to acquire their meals which made the overall experience worthwhile for the consumer. Consequently, according to both professionals and consumers social media became a significant support factor for consumers during COVID-19 as restaurants were able to stay connected with their clients and vice-versa consumers were able to follow updates from their favorite local businesses.

Data indicated the pandemic became a catalyst in promoting feelings of mental fatigue – where consumers purchased take-out frequently as an activity, for fun, and to gain a sense of pre-pandemic normalcy. Even though take-out food quality was perceived as mediocre, which professionals attributed to restaurant worker layoffs and businesses struggling with unqualified staff, consumers were more concerned for safety, convenience, and price value than food quality.

RQ 2: What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ordering Food from Local Independent Restaurants During COVID-19?

The findings identified convenience and supporting local restaurants as related advantages for ordering take-out. Consumers believed take-out meals were convenient, affordable, accessible, and higher value than franchises. Evidence supported that while most consumers enjoyed the variety of take-out from independent restaurants, some preferred and trusted franchise take-out due to standardized quality control. Take-out food quality was a disadvantage compared to eating the same meal in a restaurant - consumers indicated take-out is mediocre and sometimes prepared poorly. Even though the data indicated that poor food quality would affect repurchase intent, participants related the matter of quality to staffing shortages due to COVID-19 and mentioned they felt compelled to aid the industry by supporting the local businesses by purchasing take-out from independent restaurants. In addition, take-out meals were considered a bargain in price value compared to dining in a restaurant where service charges and gratuities augmented the bill. Therefore, take-out was synonymous with convenience and value, which indicated a level of customer satisfaction and contentment – a principle stated in research by Andersson and Mossberg (2004).

An advantage for procuring more take-out was supported by the restaurant reservation system, which made indoor dining significantly problematic for consumers - thus, amplifying the need for convenient meal experiences at home.

RQ 3: How do Consumers Compare a Take-Out Experience Versus Dining in a Traditional Restaurant Setting?

This study's findings agree with previous meal experience studies by Andersson and Mossberg (2004) and Gustafsson et al. (2006), who indicate table service and atmosphere to be essential and valuable elements in satisfactory restaurant experiences. Previous research revealed that food presentation and quality were significant to the overall restaurant experience while take-out was not considered as memorable. Specifically, Taar (2014), indicated that home-cooked meals or eating at home do not represent memorable or extraordinary experiences. However, the findings of this study disagree with Taar (2014). This research found that take-out food consumed at home by homebound populations during COVID-19 can become a memorable occasion or special event for consumers - resulting in a comfortable, convenient, safe, and affordable solution. The analysis suggested that even though the take-out food quality was inferior, the overall experience was superior at home. Evidence suggests consumers still miss occasionally dining in restaurants but have assimilated take-out as a new dining experience which will remain even after restrictions ease.

Further analysis of value perception determined that consumers consider attributes such as experience, monetary value, atmosphere, service, and food as valuable commodities. Gustafsson et al. (2006) suggested that individuals look for encounters beyond the food itself, where the restaurant provides the space for consumers to relax, enjoy, and socialize - therefore, supporting that take-out is also perceived as a valuable experience. Ultimately, the findings suggested that dining in restaurants during COVID-19 was challenging, leaving consumers to reminisce about the unmatched quality of restaurant experiences in pre-pandemic times.

However, the pandemic enabled individuals to re-evaluate experiences and prioritize which aspects of dining are essential and worth replicating.

Conclusion

In summary, the study found that consumers were eager to dine out due to feeling fatigued from being housebound for prolonged periods (Di Renzo et al., 2020), further establishing that dining in restaurants is a form of socializing (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Brown et al., 2021). Even though take-out food quality was perceived as inferior in pre-pandemic times, during COVID-19 take-out experiences were the only available options for both consumers and restaurants which forced businesses to focus on take-out. While evidence suggests consumers still miss the occasional dining in restaurants, participants regard take-out as a valuable new dining commodity that may possibly remain even after restrictions ease.

Considerations

While this study focused on consumer, take-out experiences during the pandemic it only concentrated on the independent restaurant industry in Ottawa. Franchises are merely mentioned in the analysis to provide restaurant operation insights and consumer preferences but are not analyzed in depth from a consumer experience aspect. However, by exclusively looking into independent restaurant take-out the scope of this research is not complete as many consumers consider franchises for their gastronomic experiences as indicated in the findings.

Similarly, the foundation of this study was to gain substantive information explaining the pandemic effects on consumers and their dining experiences at home. It is worth mentioning that even though there aren't many academic or peer-reviewed papers to draw information from,

there was a plethora of current, evolving, and day-to-day grey literature that described the current state of the industry and its consumers.

While current populations have never trekked through COVID-19 before, global pandemics have been re-occurring throughout millennia. Therefore, this study offers the chance to document and archive consumer behaviors in the foodservice industry on a micro-level since it is limited to Ottawa only.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the small number of interviews; even though the data collection reached saturation with all 18 participants, the scope of the study was fairly narrow as only independent restaurants were investigated. A broader scope such as including franchises as well as including a more extensive sampling of participants would provide additional data in this study. A drawback of this study was the lack of resources to study, research, and investigate the pandemic effects in the restaurant industry on a larger scale. Currently, countries worldwide are treading through virus mutations such as the delta and omicron COVID-19 strains, which have prolonged safety measures and unpredictable business operations (Gomez, 2021). This project's aim is far more significant and needs to be re-evaluated with multiple research methods to add validity since there is a constant flow of current information. Lack of similar studies and substantiated peer-reviewed material made this research uncharted territory where the probability of revisiting this research is high since the pandemic hasn't concluded yet.

Researchers and industry experts agree that more studies are necessary towards identifying consumer patterns during the pandemic as the restaurant industry is in dire need of developing strategies and tools to overcome hiring challenges and business closures (Desjardins,

2021; Diebner et al., 2020; Di Renzo et al., 2020; Goddard, 2020; Peistikou, 2021, Restaurants Canada, 2020). Furthermore, a post-pandemic review could also offer answers in creating safeguarding and prevention mechanisms to help the restaurant industry from similar socio-economic events.

Recommendations

While this research study did not examine experiences from chain restaurants, a recommendation is the inclusion of franchises, since participants mentioned in many cases they chose franchise take-out for affordability, convenience, and consistency. By exploring the aforementioned variables this study will gain diversified data which can be included to this analysis. Another recommendation is to conduct a quantitative or mixed methods research study to find supporting demographic information such as consumer background. This research will benefit from future revisitation to establish what types of meal experiences consumers perceive as gastronomic experiences and if the current definition still holds merit. Cross-referencing data after the pandemic has ended will confirm if take-out has remained an established 'at home' gastronomic experience.

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Appendix A



19 April 2022

Ethical Review – Mary Kosta

To Whom It May Concern:

[This letter confirms that the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (RRU REB) approved research for the project: **Homebound: Has Independent Restaurant Take-Out Created New 'At-Home' Gastronomic Experiences?**, in accordance with TCPS 2 (2018) *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and [RRU Research Ethics Policy](#).

Approval was granted on July 20, 2021.

Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Gina Amellino
Research Ethics Coordinator

Appendix B

Research Consent Form

My name is Mary Kosta, and you are invited to participate in my research project, Homebound: Has Independent Restaurant Take-Out Created New ‘At-Home’ Gastronomic Experiences?

This research project is part of the requirement for achieving a Master of Arts in Tourism Management degree at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting my supervisor, Dr. Bill Gregorash. The research aims to identify consumer perceptions with the restaurant industry and if people will continue dining at home with restaurant-prepared meals compared to eating in a restaurant setting after the COVID-19 pandemic. You may verify the authenticity of this project by contacting my academic supervisor Dr. Bill Gregorash. Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you.

Your participation will consist of being interviewed with a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions and your involvement will last approximately 30- 40 minutes. The questions will refer to dining experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Tourism Management I will also be sharing my research findings with industry professionals, independent restaurants, and hospitality academics.

The research results will be published in public outlets, including [thesis/doctoral dissertation] that will be published in RRU’s Digital Archive, Pro-Quest and Library and Archives Canada. The results might also be disseminated at public and academic conferences and presentations. Participants of this study will also receive a copy of the finalized research.

While there are no foreseeable risks from participating, this research aims to help the restaurant industry and accumulate valuable data generated by your experience as consumers.

Anonymity: Interviews will be carried out virtually and recorded digitally. The information will then be summarized, in anonymous format, in the final report. Your comments will remain anonymous, unless you agree to be identified in the report.

Confidentiality: All documentation will be kept strictly confidential and no personally identifiable information will be used in the report itself.

Potential Risks: There are no social, behavioural, psychological, physical, or economic risks in collecting data in this study. Data is only related to food preferences and dining habits and will be stored only by myself therefore, this research poses minimal risk for data leakage or breach of confidentiality. Data will be kept in a password-protected personal computer. However, since we will be using US based software to conduct our interviews, data may be stored on or accessible by servers in the United States and may be subject to examination by government or law enforcement under the Patriot Act. While this likelihood is small, I am required to let you/my participants know this possible risk.

Withdrawal: Data may be withdrawn only until the finalization of the report. Data may no longer be withdrawn once it becomes part of an anonymized data set.

All data will be retained for the duration of this study and destroyed by July 01, 2022. Data will not be retained pertaining to an individual who has withdrawn at any time.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence. This research project has been approved by the RRU Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethicalreview@royalroads.ca; 1-250-391-2600 ext. 4425.

By replying affirmatively to this email, you are indicating your agreement to participate in this project. In doing so, you are not waiving any legal rights.

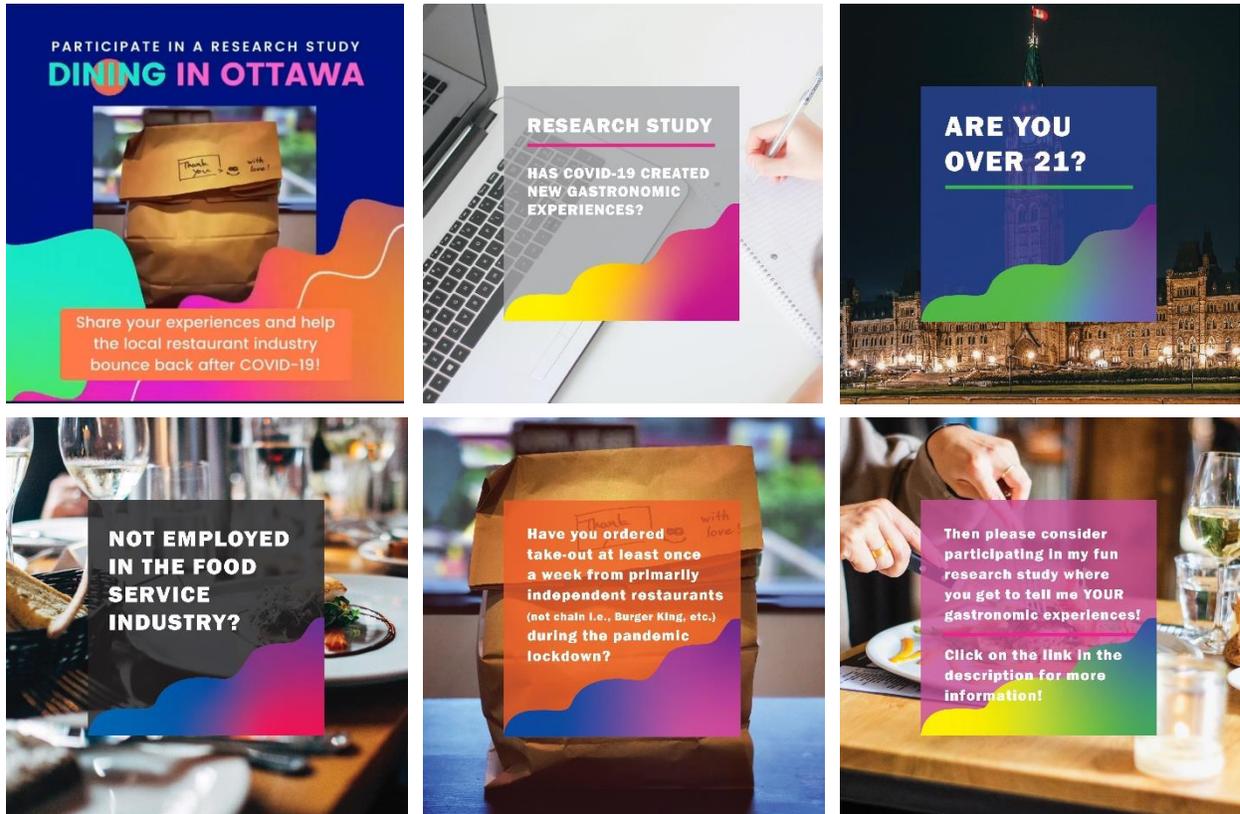
Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Advertisement for Social Media



Note. This advertisement was posted on social media accounts. Interested parties willing to participate would follow the link provided and then proceed to fill out the questionnaire along with the study's consent form.

Appendix D

LETTER OF INVITATION

Homebound: Has Independent Restaurant Take-Out Created New 'At-Home' Gastronomic Experiences?

Dear Participant,

I would like to invite you to be part of my research project. This project is part of the requirement for a Degree in Master of Arts in Tourism Management, at Royal Roads University. My name is Mary Kosta, and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting Dr. Bill Gregorash.

The purpose of this study is to investigate dining experiences from a consumer's point of view. Research includes discovering perceptions and motivations among homebound diners in Ottawa before and after government lockdown measures. The aim is to generate data for the restaurant industry which could be used to better understand consumer needs and expectations during and after COVID-19. I will also be sharing my research findings with professionals in the restaurant industry and academics to validate the research.

My research project will consist of semi-structured interviews conducted virtually through Zoom or Skype which are expected to last approximately 30- 45 minutes. The interview will include questions such as:

- How has COVID-19 impacted your social and dining lifestyle?
- Describe your eating habits and dining routine before COVID-19.
- Describe your dining at home experience during COVID-19.
- What was your most frequent/ regular meal order during the pandemic and why?
- How do you feel about restaurants operating at full capacity post COVID-19?

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because of your interest in my research study. If you would like to participate in this project, please contact me to book an interview time that is convenient for you:

For more information regarding potential and anticipated risks, confidentiality, anonymity, and procedures of withdrawal, please review the detailed information outlined in the **Research Consent Form**.

Sincerely,

Mary Kosta

Appendix E

Interview Preamble:

“Throughout this interview, when the word ‘take-out’ is used I am referring to food & beverage consumed from an independent restaurant that has been either delivered or picked up. We are not talking about franchise/chain restaurant experiences”

Section 1: Broad questions- Icebreakers

1. **How many people live in your household and who prepares the meals in your family?**
2. **In your words, how important is having a meal with your family and friends?**
3. **Do you order take-out? Why?**
4. Describe the process of ordering and eating a take-out meal in your household.
 - Who makes the decision?
 - Does it have to be an occasion for ordering take out?
5. **How frequently did you dine in restaurants before COVID-19?**
 - (Probing Questions if positive answer):
 - For what reasons did you choose to dine in restaurants?
 - What aspects of eating in a restaurant made the dining experience memorable for you (before COVID-19)?
 - (Probing questions if negative):
 - What are your preferred dining methods, do you enjoy mostly eating in restaurants, take out/ delivery or cooking at home? Why?
 - How often do you cook at home?
 - How often do you order take out? ...
 - What is the motivation for take-out?

Section 2: Grand tour questions - Dining Experiences during COVID-19

6. **When COVID restrictions came to place, were you able to maintain/ continue your dining regime? (If participant says yes, read through green and yellow successively. If no, go only to yellow)**
(Probing if positive answer):
 - -How did restaurant closures and dining-in restrictions affect your eating habits?
 - Who did you dine with?
 - -Was it an occasion?
 - -How did you feel during dining?
 - -Did you feel comfortable being in a restaurant setting?
 - -Was the overall experience as expected?
 - (Probing questions if negative):
 - If COVID restrictions negatively affected your eating out habits, did you try other ways to maintain your lifestyle?
 - Why not?
 7. **How does your take-out experience compare to a dining experience in restaurants?**
 8. **After restrictions ease, do you believe that your habits will change too? Why?**
 - What is your impression of independent restaurants compared to franchise/chain?
 - Why do you order take out from independent restaurants?
 - Does any previous history with restaurants factor in your preferences?
 - Have your feelings changed towards restaurants you used to frequent before Covid?
 9. **What values play a role in deciding to get take-out vs going out to a restaurant during Covid?**
(Answers can be convenience, ease, safety, price et.)
 10. **Describe your experience of having take-out meals at home during the pandemic and how you feel?**
 11. **On average, how many times a week did you order take-out from an independent restaurant during lockdown?**
 12. **Since the re-opening of restaurants, have you dined in a restaurant?**
 - -Was it an Indoor experience?
 - -Was it a Patio experience?
 - -Describe your experience.
- (Probing if negative answer-What are your reasons for not dining out?)
13. **Compare your take-out experiences to restaurant dining experiences. Which do you prefer and why?**
 - Would your preferences change if there were friends or family involved?

14. What are your thoughts about dining in restaurants after COVID-19 subsides?
15. Has the pandemic affected your dining preferences? How so?
16. How do you feel about the local restaurant scene? Do you have enough restaurant options to choose from for take-out?
 - Do online ordering services play a role in the home experience? Which ones?

Section 3: Closing

17. Is there anything about take-out experiences that you find relevant that I have not asked you?
18. If necessary, would you be willing to have a follow up conversation if there are more questions that need to be examined?

Thank you for your time and participation in my study!

After this interview the data will be analyzed and recorded on a digital database. Data may be withdrawn only until the finalization of the report. If the data has already been collected, analyzed, and submitted then it will no longer be eligible for withdrawal.

All data will be retained for the duration of this study and destroyed by July 01, 2022. Data will not be retained pertaining to an individual who has withdrawn at any time.

If you have any further questions about the study, you are welcome to reach out to Royal Roads University for clarification.