



The antecedents to consumer's dining out behavior in Pakistan – A Post Covid Analysis

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Abstract:

Covid-19 has hit the country hard, and the disruption caused by the pandemic has severely affected the hospitality industry especially the full-service restaurants operating in Pakistan. However, the pandemic is here to stay and businesses must strive to reconfigure their business strategies to adapt to this new normal. This study aims to examine the factors that best predict consumers' behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants in the city of Karachi. Hence, the study has taken into account esthetic stimulation and restaurant's precautionary measures as the predictors of consumer's behavioral intention all the while assessing the mediating role of memorable experience and moderating role of Gender in the relationship amid esthetic stimulation and consumer's intention to dine at full-service restaurants. The data for this study were collected from 199 respondents living in the city of Karachi, and Smart PLS-SEM was used to analyze the data for results. The study presented some valuable findings for the managers which will help them in improving their business practices and plan for future uncertainties.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, full-service restaurants, behavioral intentions, esthetic stimulation, restaurants precautionary measures, memorable experience.

Introduction

Customer experience is critical to every successful enterprise because a customer who feels valued and enjoys the experience derived from a brand would always come back for more. Hence, the part of customer exposure has been identified and embedded into various industries (Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2015). The millennials demand exposure and satisfaction because the modern era of marketing has transformed the product or service into an experience that drives value for the customer (Horng & Hsu, 2021). The millennials demand exposure and satisfaction because the modern era of marketing has transformed the product or service into an experience that drives value for the customer (Horng & Hsu, 2021).

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Moreover, customer experience is critical especially in the hospitality industry, where the services offered are a mix of tangible items and intangible processes which produces a pleasant-sounding outcome for the customer (Eerang & Boo, 2019).

Past literature has broadly talked about experiences in the hospitality industry and the environments of the hospitality sector have also identified that strategies related to sensuous experience can improve the financial conditions of the hospitality business (Hussain & Azeem, 2019). Furthermore, a prominence on esthetics, which is among the four major pillars of experience has emerged in the literature (Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2015). Nonetheless, only a few studies have considered real esthetic features and pragmatic perspectives (Eerang & Boo, 2019). In addition, memory is found to play a significant role in the esthetic economy, and studies have shown that it contributes to conditions that relate to human emotions such as pleasantness or pleasure which relates to the notion of esthetics (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014). However, only a few studies have discussed the association amid Esthetic stimulation and consumer buying intention with memorable experience considered as a mediator in the association amid esthetic stimulation and behavioral intention (Horng & Hsu, 2021).

Likewise, esthetic experience is often considered as a cycle where the consumer's past experiences about a restaurant influence the present conditions and future perceptions. Hence, there is a need to include a moderating variable to further explore the effects of esthetic stimulation and consumer behavioral intention (Horng & Hsu, 2021). Moreover, Covid-19 resulted in a major crisis for the hospitality industry, restaurants were closed due to the lockdown in various countries including Pakistan. Additionally, consumers demonstrated a tendency to avoid public gatherings and were more inclined towards a private dining experience. Hence, these circumstances prove that there is a significant need to consider that might restore consumer intention to visit the restaurants (Kim & Lee, 2020). Hence, if a restaurant provides precautionary measures such as contactless payment, hand sanitizers, and private dining spaces, then the consumers will feel safer, and this will result in the consumer's behavioral intention to dine at the restaurant (Zhong, Oh, & Moon, 2021). Hence, our study has addressed these gaps by adding Consumer Gender as a variable that moderates the association amid behavioral intention and esthetic stimulation (Jin, Line, & Goh, 2013), and by adding another variable "Restaurant Precautionary measures" to explore the outcome of the consumer's dining experience in Pakistan.

Our research intends to serve the following objectives:

1. To address the gap in the literature about the role of real esthetic features and memorable experience in stimulating consumer's behavioral intention to dine at full-service restaurants
2. To address the gap in the literature about the role of Precautionary Measures taken by Restaurants to stimulate consumer's behavioral intention towards dining at full-service Restaurants during the Post Pandemic Scenario
3. To identify whether Gender plays a moderating role in the relationship amid esthetic stimulation and behavioral intention of consumers to dine at full-service Restaurants.

Likewise, the following research questions will be addressed in our research:

- Does esthetic stimulation affect consumers' behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants in Karachi, Pakistan?
- Does a memorable experience mediate this relationship?



- Do Precautionary Measures taken by Restaurants positively stimulate consumers' intention to dine at full-service Restaurants?
- Does Gender play a moderating role in the relationship amid esthetic stimulation and consumer's behavioral intention?

Theoretical Background

The experience was accounted for and incorporated into sectors because millennials today demand both satisfaction and experience (Chen, Peng, & Hung, 2016). Moreover, the hospitality industry has extensively studied the role of dining experience and identified that strategies about experiences of sensory can improve the financial growth of hospitality businesses (Ong, Lee, & Ramayah, 2018). However, the literature has not addressed the real aesthetic aspects and experiential perspective of the consumers in hospitality dining (Horng & Hsu, 2021). Likewise, in the post-Covid scenario, the consumer's perceived psychological and physical risks about the infection have somewhat negatively stimulated the consumer's behavioral intention towards dining at restaurants, hence, precautionary measures taken by restaurants play an important role in positively directing consumer's behavioral intention towards dining at restaurants (Zhong, Oh, & Moon, 2021).

Our study explores the role of esthetic stimulation, memorable experiences, restaurant precautionary measures, and behavioral intention of the consumer in esthetics and experiential perspectives towards dining at full-service restaurants. Additionally, the esthetics theory (Horng & Hsu, 2021) and theory of reasoned action (Zhong, Oh, & Moon, 2021) have been underpinned in the research to support the theoretical framework of the study. The theory of esthetics is the philosophy that deals with the aspects of beauty, taste, and arts (Nick, 2007). The theory suggests that five senses are often used by consumers to obtain and comprehend information during the interaction process between the subjects and the objects (Kirillova, & Chan, 2018). Additionally, the sensory system of a human is segregated into two dimensions, distance receptors, and instantaneous receptors. The former dimension deals with the olfactory, auditory and visual senses, while the latter deals with the senses of touch and taste. Hence, the esthetics of the dining experience should consider all the senses of the consumer to gauge a more holistic esthetic experience (Horng & Hsu, 2021).

Likewise, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) suggests that the behavioral intention of a consumer is affected by attitude and normative beliefs. Hence, TRA has been adopted because it is an important theory that explains the consumer's behavioral intention towards the consumption of food (Zhong, Oh, & Moon, 2021); (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992). However, like numerous other studies (Ajzen, 2015), rather than focusing on investigating consumer attitude, our study was focused primarily on the consumer's behavioral intention to dine at full-service restaurants and finding out its antecedents through the esthetics and experiential perspectives.

Theoretical Development of Hypotheses

Esthetic Stimulation and Behavioral Intention

According to Maslow's theory of motivation, the esthetic needs of a consumer sits at the top level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1970). Hence, the restaurants should be more inclined towards the consumer's esthetic needs when working on improving the dining experiences by considering the "esthetic" aspects of both the physical products and the intangible services (Kirillova, & Chan,



2018). Horng and Hsu identified the numerous characteristics of the aesthetic experience of dining and assembled four major types of esthetic stimulation which include, physical environment, services and products, employee esthetic traits, and consumer's other esthetic traits (Horng & Hsu, 2020). Previous studies have discussed the role of the attributes of esthetic stimulation such as employee esthetic traits such as body odor and clothes in stimulating consumer behavioral intention (Guéguen & Jacob, 2012). Likewise, other customers' esthetic traits also improve consumers' behavioral intention (Hanks & Line, 2018), and the physical environment, products, and services also positively affect consumers' behavioral intention (Horng & Hsu, 2020). Hence, the following hypothesis was developed:

H1: Esthetic Stimulation positively influences consumer behavioral intention towards dining in at full-service restaurants

Esthetic Stimulation, Memorable Experience, and Behavioral Intention

A previous study has revealed that esthetic stimulation can significantly influence consumers' memory (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). One more study assessed the role of a consumer's memorable experience in stimulating future behavioral intention (Kim & Ritchie, 2013). Hence, it is revealed that memorable experiences should be added in the research about the hospitality industry (Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2015). A study conducted on tourist experienced revealed that memorable experiences played a mediating role amid behavioral intention and consumer emotions (Liu, Lu, & Hsu, 2010). In light of these arguments, the study assumes that memory may play a significant mediating role between consumer behavioral intention and esthetic stimulation. Hence, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2: Memorable experience mediates the relationship between esthetic stimulation and consumer behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants

Restaurant Precautionary Measures and Behavioral Intention

In the post-Covid scenario, the consumer's perceived risk of getting infected in public gathering places like restaurants developed a negative perception among the consumers towards dining experiences (Cheng et al, 2020). Public gatherings with close interactions and sharing of food inside the restaurant can lead to cluster infection, and therefore, cleaning the surface, providing hand sanitizers and private dining spaces, and measures are taken for disinfection improve consumer's behavioral intention towards offline dining (Zhong, Oh, & Moon, 2021). Hence, the following hypothesis was developed:

H3: Restaurant precautionary measures positively influences consumer behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants

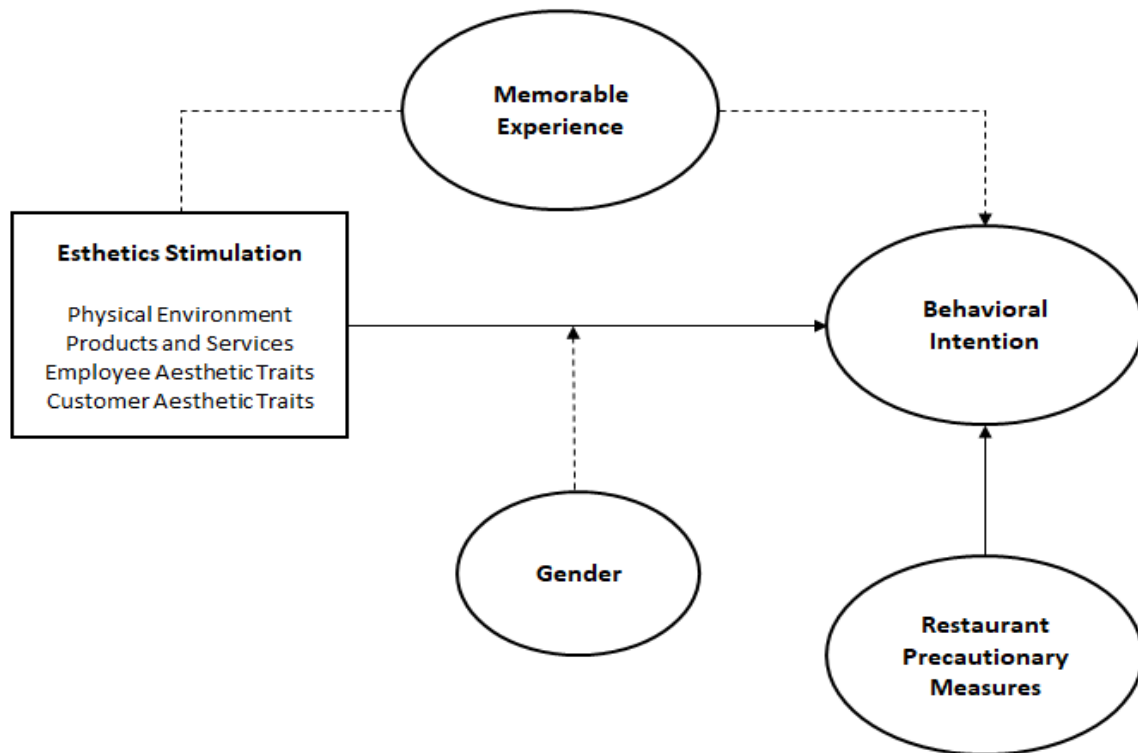
Gender as a Moderator in the relationship amid Esthetic Stimulation and Behavioral Intention

A study on consumer loyalty and experiential value found that gender plays a substantial part in consumer behavior models. The study revealed that female genders have a higher level of expectation and perception of hotel services when compared to male genders (Jin, Line, & Goh, 2013). Likewise, another study suggested that satisfied female customers demonstrated a strong intention to revisit a restaurant when compared to male customers (Kwun, 2011). Hence, it is

assumed that Gender moderates the relationship amid esthetic stimulation and Behavioral Intention, and the following hypothesis was postulated:

H4: That the consumer's gender plays a moderating part in the association amid esthetic stimulation and consumer behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

The research is intended to explore the influence of aesthetic stimulation on consumer behavioral intention towards dining at restaurants with the mediating effect of memorable experience and moderating effect of consumer gender. In this research study, a quantitative method was adopted where numerical data were collected and statistically analyzed to test the hypotheses of the study (Osborne, 2008). Likewise, an explanatory research purpose was adopted to examine the problem by establishing and assessing the cause and effect relationships (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, a deductive research approach was assumed because the research intends to test the postulated hypotheses during the research process to derive implications from the study (Plonsky, 2017).

In addition, our study adopted a causal research design to examine the problem and understand the patterns of the relationship between the latent variables (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). The causal research design enabled in identifying the cause and effect relationship between the latent variables of the construct hence, satisfying the research purpose (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The research was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan where the total population is 16.5 million citizens (Populationstat, 2020), however out of these citizens data was acquired from those individuals who



were regular visitors or had some experience with full-service restaurants in Karachi like GINSOY, JARDIN, THE VALLEY, MEET THE CHEESE, SOBREMASA, etc. A total of 199 respondents were selected as a research sample. The individuals who were part of the sample had some past experiences of dining out at full-service restaurants in Karachi and were familiar with the esthetics and restaurant precautionary measures as a response to Covid-19.

The sample size was selected using the convenience sampling technique which falls under non-random sampling. The non-random sampling technique is where the sample is selected from the population following a non-random criterion and every member does not get an equal chance to be a part of the total sample size (Kohler, Kreuter, & Stuart, 2019). Moreover, under this criterion the convenience sampling technique allows the researcher to gather data from people who were easily accessible, and since the data required was from those respondents who had previous dine-out experiences, hence, they were easily contacted through social media platforms (Osborne, 2008).

The data from the respondents was collected using a close-ended questionnaire measuring the latent variables of the construct through items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly denying to strongly agree (Chyung, Roberts, Swanson, & Hankinson, 2017). The questionnaire was adapted from past studies (Horng& Hsu, 2021; Zhong& Moon, 2021) and designed using Google forms, and disseminated among the respondents using various social media channels like Facebook and LinkedIn. The data was then tested using Smart PLS, the inter-item reliability of the instrument was confirmed through Chronbach Alpha, and structured equation modeling was used to test the causal relationships among the latent variables. The research also took into consideration various ethical norms during the research process such as ensuring complete anonymity of the respondent and taking the respondent’s consent before using the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Table 1 Profile of Respondents

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	143	71.85
	Female	56	28.15
	Total	199	100.00
Age	<20	23	11.56
	21-30	86	43.22
	31-40	34	17.09
	41-50	38	19.10
	>51	18	9.05
	Total	199	100.00
Income	Less than 25,000	23	11.56
	25,000-35,000	62	31.16
	35,000-45,000	48	24.12
	50,000 and above	66	33.17



Total	199	100.00
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The respondent profile has been shown in table 1. The data was acquired from 199 respondents online using Google forms. The male respondents were greater in number as compared to females. Likewise, the majority of the respondents were aged between 21 years to 30 years while only a few respondents were aged above 50 years. The income level of the majority of our respondents was greater than Rs. 50,000 and between Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 35,000. Only a few respondents had an income level below Rs. 25,000. This means that our respondents had moderate income levels and could easily afford fine dining at restaurants.

Table 2 Evaluation of Outer Loadings

Outer Loadings						
	Behavior Intention	Esthetic Stimulation	Gender	Gender as Moderator	Memorable Experience	Restaurant Precautionary Measures
BI1	0.919					
BI2	0.760					
ES1		0.790				
ES2		0.787				
ES4		0.861				
ES5		0.859				
ES6		0.837				
ES7		0.815				
ES8		0.898				
G			1.000			
ES *				1.008		
Gender						
ME1					0.891	
ME2					0.883	
ME3					0.935	
ME4					0.864	
RPM2						0.829
RPM3						0.875

The outer loadings are shown in Table 2, all of the outer loadings are above the acceptable value of 0.70 which means that each item accurately measures its respective variable, and hence the reliability has been confirmed (Hair, et al., 2012). However, there were problems with two items i.e. ES 3 and RPM 1 which were then removed from the construct to resolve the issue.

**Table 3 Convergent Validity**

Convergent Validity			
	CA	CR	AVE
Behavioral Intention	0.613	0.830	0.711
Esthetic Stimulation	0.928	0.942	0.699
Gender	1.000	1.000	1.000
Gender as Moderator	1.000	1.000	1.000
Memorable Experience	0.916	0.941	0.799
RPM	0.625	0.841	0.726

The convergent validity of the construct is shown in Table 3. The values of Chronbach Alpha which are greater than the acceptable value of 0.60 (Griethuijsen, et al., 2015) show that the scale reliability has been confirmed. This means that the items are internally consistent. Likewise, the values of composite reliability further confirm the internal consistency among the scale items as its value is above the acceptable value of 0.70 (Henseler, et al., 2015). Similarly, the AVE values which are well above the acceptable value of 0.50 show that the construct captures the right amount of variance. Hence, reliability has been confirmed.

Table 4 Fornell&Larcker Criterion

Discriminant Validity: Fornell&Larcker Criterion						
	BI	ES	Gender	Gender as Moderator	ME	RPM
BI	0.843					
ES	0.599	0.836				
Gender	0.052	0.090	1.000			
Gender as Moderator	0.071	0.111	0.019	1.000		
ME	0.678	0.875	0.099	0.056	0.894	
RPM	0.595	0.542	0.183	0.128	0.588	0.852

The discriminant validity of the construct was checked in the second stage of data analysis. The first criterion for assessing the discriminant validity was Fornell & Larcker. The values of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) shown in bold and diagonal are greater than its correlation with the other construct. Hence, every item loads higher on its respective construct which shows that the discriminant validity under this criterion has been confirmed (Ab Hamid, Sami, and Sidek, 2017).

Table 5 HTMT Criterion

Discriminant Validity: HTMT Criterion						
	BI	ES	Gender	Gender as Moderator	ME	RPM
BI	-					
ES	0.745	-				



Gender	0.071	0.095	-		
Gender as Moderator	0.092	0.117	0.019	-	
ME	0.849	0.841	0.103	0.057	-
RPM	0.834	0.722	0.230	0.164	0.775 -

In the second stage, the discriminant validity was verified through another criterion known as Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). Under this criterion, any value closer to 1 shows an absence of discriminant validity. However, all the values are less than 0.90 which verifies discriminant validity (Ab Hamid, Sami, and Sidek, 2017). This means that the scale items that should not be related are unrelated.

Table 6 R², Adjusted R² & Blindfolding Test

R ² , Adjusted R ² & Stone-Giesser's Test (Q ²)				
	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Q ² (=1-SSE/SSO)	
BI	0.521	0.509	0.342	
ES	-	-	-	
Gender	-	-	-	
Gender as Moderator	-	-	-	
ME	0.765	0.764	0.605	
RPM	-	-	-	

In the third stage of data analysis, the R² and Adjusted R² were estimated. The values in Table 6 show that over 50% of the variance in the dependent variable i.e. Behavioral Intention is explained by its respective independent variables. Likewise, over 76% of the variance in the dependent variable i.e. Restaurant Precautionary Measures is explained by its respective independent variables (Henseler, et al., 2015). Likewise, "Stone-Giesser's" test was applied to assess the cross-validated predictive relevance of the construct. The value shown in Table 6 is below the acceptable value '0' which shows that the path model has predictive relevance (Hair, et al., 2012).

Table 7 Path Coefficients**Hypothesis Test Summary**

	SRW	P Values	Remarks
ES -> BI	6.254	0.000	Significant
ES -> ME	42.219	0.000	Significant
ME->BI	4.804	0.000	Significant
RPM -> BI	4.431	0.000	Significant
Gender as Moderator -> BI	0.126	0.899	Insignificant

In the final stage of data analysis, the hypothesis was tested using the bootstrapping technique which enables to examine the significance of the Partial Least Square – Structured Equation Modelling results. The cause and effect relationships were estimated in the path model among the latent variables (Hair, et al., 2012). The results in table 6 show that all of our hypotheses have been accepted as their P-value is less than the acceptable value i.e. 0.05. However, the effects of gender

as a moderator on the relationship amid Esthetic stimulation and Behavioral Intention were found to be insignificant in our study.

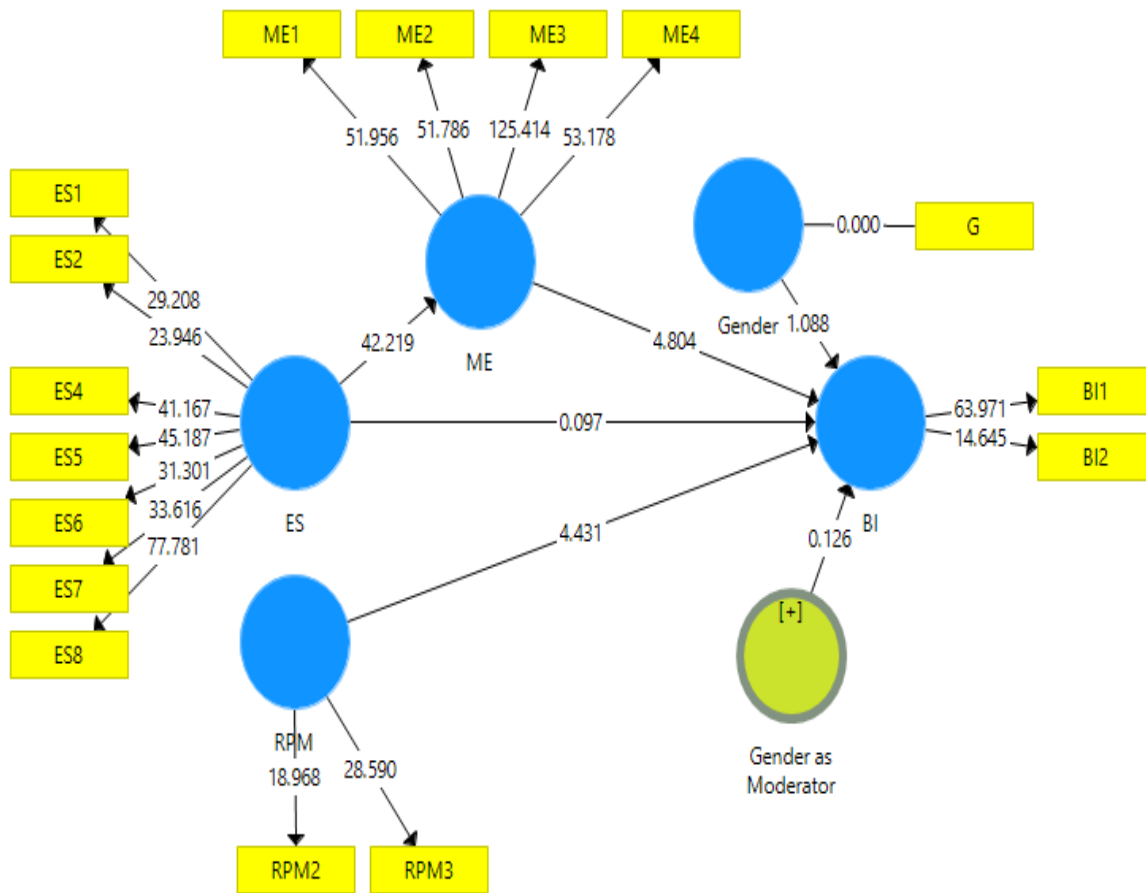


Figure 1 Bootstrapping Model

The results of our study have revealed that esthetic stimulation plays a very important role in stimulating consumer behavioral intention towards dining at full-service restaurants in Pakistan. The esthetic features considered in our study were physical environment, product aspects, and employee and consumer esthetic traits. It was revealed that in the context of esthetic dining experience all of these factors play an imperative role in a consumer’s decision-making process when choosing a restaurant to dine in. Likewise, our study confirmed the mediating role of memorable experience which means that restaurant esthetic aspects would result in a consumer’s memorable experience and then behavioral intention emerges. These results were quite similar to the findings of Horng & Hsu, (2021). Another important revelation of our study was the significant effect of restaurant precautionary measures on consumers’ behavioral intention to dine at full-service restaurants. These results imply that restaurants that take precautionary measures and follow all SOP’s are successful in attracting consumers to dine at their place. However, these findings differed from the findings of Zhong, Oh, & Moon, (2021) who suggested that in China precautionary measures taken by restaurants can reduce perceived psychological risks of getting affected but do not stimulate intention to dine. Nonetheless, in the context of Pakistan, these measures do affect behavioral intention positively.



Lastly, our study did not find any moderating role of gender in the relationship amid esthetic stimulation and behavioral intention. Hence, in the context of Pakistan gender does not seem to play any role in this relationship.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Our study has revealed some important and valuable findings which will contribute to the theory surrounding consumer behavioral intention in the hospitality sector in the context of the new normal. Also, it serves as a yardstick for managers to improve their business strategies and successfully adapt to the new normal. Covid-19 was the worst pandemic that affected businesses at the global level and has changed consumers' behavioral patterns. Hence, it is vital to understand these behavioral patterns to better serve the needs of the consumers and improve productivity. Our study suggests that managers should be more focused on taking precautionary measures in the restaurants like following all SOP's, providing private spaces for dining hence ensuring all possibilities to reduce the chances of infection, and also focusing on the esthetic aspects of the restaurant to positively influence consumer's behavioral intentions to dine at their restaurants. Likewise, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the restaurants can consider the use of technology and augmented reality to enhance the effects of esthetic stimulation on consumers' behavioral intention.

There are a few limitations to the study, and hence, these limitations have also been addressed along with future research directions. The data were collected from 199 respondents only from the city of Karachi. Future research should consider conducting countrywide research to acquire a deeper understanding of consumer behavioral patterns. Likewise, our research was focused on fine-dine restaurants, hence, it is deemed vital to assess consumer behavioral patterns across various categories like hotels, restaurants, and theme parks in future research on related topics.

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