The influence of social interactions on senior customers' experience and loneliness

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Abstract

Purpose – This study uses the theory of third places to understand how different kinds of social interaction in small hospitality businesses, such as restaurants and cafes, can enhance senior customers' experience and alleviate their loneliness.

Design/methodology/approach – The target population of this study was Hong Kong residents aged 60 or above. The sampling frame comprised respondents who visited a Cha Chaan Teng (that is, a Hong Kong-style tea restaurant) more than once a year. We distributed 500 questionnaires and collected 411 valid responses in 2016. We used structural equation modeling for data analysis.

Findings – The results show that social interactions (service manner and need identification) with employees and other customers have a positive effect on senior customers' experiences while the service manner of employees reduces senior customers' loneliness.

Originality/value – This study exhibits the respective contributions of social interactions with employees and those with customers to enhancing senior customers' experience and alleviating their loneliness. This study's new findings may serve as a foundation for future research on the relationship between social interactions, customer experience, and loneliness in third places.

Keywords – Social interactions; Customer experience; Loneliness; Seniors; Third places

Paper type – Research paper

1. Introduction

Loneliness is one of the most serious societal issues for seniors, with both economic and sociocultural implications in many developed economies, including Hong Kong (Windle et al., 2014). Loneliness leads to negative effects on physical and mental health, increased stress and mortality, poor sleep, and eventually increased use of health and social care services (Ayis et al., 2003; Lauder et al., 2006). Given both individuals' and communities' interest in people's well-being, health, and financial capacity, there is a national and international policy consensus that support must be provided to ameliorate social isolation and to help those seniors who live with or are on the brink of loneliness. A range of interventions have been developed to prevent and alleviate loneliness, with variable success (Masi et al., 2011). These include social care, mentoring, and volunteering; practical help with tasks like gardening, intergenerational activities, and transport; and other ways of helping seniors get out and about. There are also supportive group interventions and services, such as lunch clubs and social group schemes that provide access to libraries and museums and that aim to help people widen their social circles. These activities help to prevent seniors' social isolation, increase their quality of life, and reduce public health expenditure (Losada et al., 2012). Drawing upon continuity theory, Pettigrew (2007) found that older people who maintain an active social life (e.g., going out and seeing other people) tend to have higher well-being. In particular, eating and drinking rituals, reading, gardening, and shopping help older people to remain socially active and alleviate loneliness.

There is a growing consensus in the literature that social interaction helps to reduce loneliness among senior customers. The relevant studies have focused on the influence of quantity and quality of social interactions on loneliness (Toepoel, 2013; Breen, 2009; Pettigrew,

2007; Kim et al., 2005; Dykstra, 1990; Pinqart and Sörensen, 2001; Rook and Pietromonaco, 1987). However, to date, research on the relationship between specific types of social interactions and loneliness is lacking. Studies have tended to divide customers' social interactions during the consumption process into two types: social interactions with employees and with other customers (Fakharyan et al., 2014; Levy, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Edgall et al., 1997). However, there is a research gap on the respective effect of each of the two types of social interaction on senior customers' loneliness. Moreover, psychology, healthcare, and sociology researchers have investigated the relationship between social interactions and loneliness without considering the role of commercial activities, particularly in the hospitality industry, in helping seniors to tackle their loneliness. The hospitality industry is frequently criticized for its promotion of unhealthy eating and drinking and for contributing to public disorder, but its role in addressing social concerns about senior customers' loneliness is yet to be investigated.

This study addresses these research gaps. It uses the theory of third places to evaluate how social interactions with employees and with other customers in small hospitality businesses, such as restaurants and cafes, influence senior customers' loneliness by enhancing their customer experience. This study makes two important contributions. First, it highlights the importance of the social space created by the hospitality industry and is the first study to compare the respective effects of two types of social interaction (with employees and with customers) on enhancing the hospitality customer experience and alleviating loneliness among senior customers. Second, it demonstrates the role and importance of the hospitality industry in addressing a social problem. It makes apparent that the ultimate goal of the hospitality service experience goes beyond merely providing a business transaction, for this experience also plays an important role in addressing loneliness among senior customers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Third places

Third places can be defined as informal public places that offer individuals opportunities to escape from home and the workplace and to enjoy voluntary conversation, entertainment, and gatherings (Oldenburg, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2006). By this definition, a range of small hospitality businesses, such as restaurants, cafes, and taverns, are typical third places in daily life (Rosenbaum, 2006). Compared with younger generations, seniors usually suffer more negative and stressful events that lead to loneliness (e.g., the death of a spouse, illness, divorce, or retirement). Studies have found that many senior customers who lack other social networks enjoy interacting or forming friendships with employees in third places to satisfy their needs for companionship and emotional support (Kang and Ridgway, 1996; Forman and Sriram, 1991; Stone, 1954; Giles, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2006; Pettigrew, 2007). More specifically, Rosenbaum (2006) found that many senior customers seek conversation and entertainment in third places because they perceive a third place as “place-as-practical” (for consuming food and beverages), “place-as-gathering” (for consuming social companionship), or “place-as-home” (for consuming close and personal emotional support). Drawing on third place theory, we propose that senior customers’ social interactions in third places may improve their customer experience and remedy their loneliness by satisfying their needs for companionship and emotional support.

2.2 Social interactions and customer experience

The inevitability of interactions during the consumption process gives us good reason to investigate how these interactions influence customer experience. Several studies have exhibited the positive effect of social interactions on customer experience (Harris, 2007; Srivastava and

Kaul, 2014). The consumer experience includes the dimensions of physical environment and human interaction and is as important for a company as its products and services (Yuan and Wu, 2008). This is consistent with Carbone and Haeckel's (1994) claim that the most effective interactions occur when the physical environment and human interaction dimensions work together. Pugh (2001) suggested that customers observe and evaluate service interactions, for instance, with respect to employees' service manner, and the resultant effect on customers' comfort can influence their emotions and experiences. According to Lloyd and Luk (2013), the overall customer experience is shaped by social interactions with employees insofar as these interactions create a general sense of comfort for the customer and thus improve overall service quality and customer satisfaction.

Market-related or consumer experiences can be influenced by customers' interactions not only with employees but also with other customers (Fakharyan et al., 2014; Levy, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Edgall et al., 1997). Walls (2013) conducted 451 intercept interviews with adult hotel guests who stayed at least one night in various hotels in an international tourist destination in the United States. Walls found that four dimensions of human interaction, including guest-to-guest relations, have significant effects on guests' experiences. Other researchers, such as Baron et al. (1996) and Martin and Pranter (1989), also reported that customer experience can be affected by interactions between customers. However, few studies have compared the respective contributions of the two types of social interaction identified above to the customer experience of senior customers. We propose the following hypotheses and will compare the respective effects of the two types of interaction on seniors' customer experience.

H1: Social interactions with employees have a positive influence on customer experience.

H2: Social interactions with other customers have a positive influence on customer experience.

2.3 Social interactions and loneliness

Loneliness is commonly regarded as a feeling generated by perceived deficits in social relationships (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2007). These deficits seem to take on an almost physiological form as lonely individuals often describe themselves as feeling empty inside. Loneliness is especially prevalent in old age because there is a decline in social integration with age (Steed et al., 2007). Stalker (2008) and Orsega-Smith et al. (2007), among others, argued that social engagement among seniors needs to be examined more closely with respect to which patterns of social behavior and network characteristics improve well-being in later life. On the basis of individual interviews, Pettigrew (2007) stated that consumption behavior and activities that facilitate social interaction could help seniors to alleviate loneliness and could contribute to a higher perceived quality of life. Studies have found that both larger quantity and higher quality of social interactions have a negative effect on loneliness (Dykstra, 1990; Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001). More specifically, Pinquart and Sörensen (2001) found that the quality of social interactions is more important for alleviating older adults' loneliness than the quantity, as interactions are not always supportive but may also strain or hurt an individual (Rook and Pietromonaco, 1987). For negative social interactions, the assumption "the more, the better" does not hold. However, because the positive aspects outweigh the negative aspects in the majority of social interactions (Kim et al., 2003), one may expect increased social interactions to be associated with less loneliness. Aspects of the quality of contact (e.g., having a confidant, feeling loved and understood) should be more strongly related to positive emotions than the quantity of contacts, and inability to meet one's need for emotional support should correlate to more

loneliness. However, which kind of social interaction is more effective in addressing senior customers' loneliness still needs further study. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses and will compare the respective effects of the two types of social interaction (with employees and with customers) on seniors' loneliness.

H3: Social interactions with employees help to reduce loneliness.

H4: Social interactions with other customers help to reduce loneliness.

2.4 Customer experience and loneliness

The relationship between seniors' customer experience and loneliness does not seem to have been explored to date, but experimental marketing research suggests that experience providers' communication, vision, language, appearance, manner, and media provide consumers with conscious, emotional, and cognitive value (Su, 2011; Schmitt, 1999). There is also evidence that when older customers consume goods or services, they prefer to interact with experience providers to relieve their loneliness (Bloch et al., 1991; Forman and Sriram, 1991). Thus, we assume that when experience providers offer pleasurable experiences to older consumers, they will feel more satisfied and less lonely. Studies have shown that social interactions with both employees and other customers can contribute to seniors' experience by creating a sense of comfort or satisfaction (Lloyd and Luk, 2011), which helps to alleviate their loneliness by satisfying their companionship and emotional needs (Pettigrew, 2007). Meanwhile, a positive customer experience may help to alleviate seniors' loneliness (Bloch et al., 1991; Forman and Sriram, 1991). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

H5: Customer experience helps to reduce loneliness.

H6: Customer experience may mediate the relationship between social interactions with employees and the reduction of loneliness.

H7: Customer experience may mediate the relationship between social interactions with other customers and the reduction of loneliness.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Data collection

The target population of this study was Hong Kong residents aged 60 or above. The sampling frame comprised respondents who visited a Cha Chaan Teng more than once a year, because the Cha Chaan Teng, which is the Cantonese name for a Hong Kong-style tea restaurant, is very popular among residents of Hong Kong, Macau, and parts of Guangdong. The Cha Chaan Teng is known for its eclectic and affordable menus, which include dishes from Hong Kong cuisine and Hong Kong-style Western cuisine (e.g., Hong Kong-style milk tea) (Chang et al., 2010). As the Cha Chaan Teng plays a vital role in the cultural life of Hong Kong (Yu and Titz, 2000), it functions as a typical third place for this study. A convenience sampling method facilitated access to the target population through an online survey, which we administered with the help of a data caption company to increase the response rate. We distributed 500 questionnaires and collected 411 valid responses in 2016.

3.2 Measures

The questionnaire used for this study measured four variables. Schmitt (1999) developed the customer experience construct, which comprised five dimensions: act (five items), feel (five items), sense (five items), think (three items), and relate (five items). We adapted the scale

measuring social interactions with employees from Lloyd and Luk (2011) and included two dimensions: service manner (seven items) and need identification (four items). We adopted the scale measuring social interactions with other customers (four items) from Walls (2013). We measured loneliness using the six items from Kim et al. (2005). We selected these scales because they all had high reliability and validity and because all used a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 equaling “strongly disagree” and 7 equaling “strongly agree.”

3.3 Data analysis method

We used structural equation modeling to analyze the data via SPSS and AMOS software packages. Using SPSS, we performed analyses of descriptive statistics and correlations, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and reliability analysis to determine the characteristics of the sample population, to identify the different dimensions of the four constructs, and then to assess the significance of the relationship between the constructs. Using AMOS, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and goodness-of-fit tests on the measurement model, structural model, and hypotheses. Following De Vellis’s (1991) suggestion, we randomly split the sample into two subsamples. We used subsample A (N = 196) for EFA and subsample B (N = 215) for CFA of the measurement models. We used the full sample (N = 411) to test the structural model. To examine each of our proposed indirect effects, we followed Selig and Preacher’s (2008) method of conducting a Monte Carlo simulation (i.e., a form of parameter bootstrapping) with 2,000 replications, which provided an estimate of the confidence interval (CI) for each effect.

4 Findings

4.1 Profile of the respondents

Table 1 presents the profile of the respondents, 50.9% of whom were male and 49.1% of whom were female. Approximately 58.4% of the respondents were aged between 60 and 69, and 41.6% were aged 70 or above. The frequency of visits to a Cha Chaan Teng was divided into seven groups; the top three groups visited two or three times a week (30.9%), once a week (23.1%), and more than three times a week (21.9%). This suggests that the Cha Chaan Teng is a very popular third place for seniors. More than 63.5% of the respondents spent up to one hour in a Cha Chaan Teng. About 71.3% of the respondents tended to visit a privately owned Cha Chaan Teng, whereas only 28.7% preferred a large chain-owned Cha Chaan Teng. Although some respondents preferred to use public transport (5.1%), a private car (0.2%), or other modes of transport (0.2%), 94.4% preferred to walk to the Cha Chaan Teng, which suggests that small, community-based hospitality businesses (e.g., restaurants and cafes) should make an effort to establish themselves next to elderly communities.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The most popular time to visit a Cha Chaan Teng is in the morning (26.0%, 23.8%, 25.3%, 23.1%, 24.3%, 20.0%, and 16.5% for Monday-Sunday, respectively) and afternoon (25.3%, 26.3%, 30.2%, 25.3%, 25.8%, 21.7%, and 18.2% for Monday-Sunday, respectively), which is consistent with Hong Kong residents' preference for morning and afternoon teas. This suggests that small hospitality businesses should pay much more attention to their service in the morning and afternoon.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

4.2 Exploratory factor analysis

We first conducted EFA using principal component analysis with varimax rotation due to the simplicity of interpreting the extracted factors (Field, 2005). Several criteria were considered for factor extraction. First, the most commonly adopted standard is to retain those factors with eigenvalues above 1 (Kaiser, 1960). Second, a factor loading should exceed 0.50 (Stevens, 1992). Third, communality and scree plots should also be used for factor extraction, and for a sample size larger than 250, the average communality needs to be greater than 0.60 (Kaiser, 1974). Fourth, Cronbach's alpha for each construct should be greater than 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Consistent with previous studies (Llyod and Luk, 2011), the EFA showed that social interactions with employees comprise two factors: service manner and need identification. The results of the EFA were as follows: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = 0.93; Bartlett's test of sphericity, Chi-square (χ^2) = 1,819.73; degrees of freedom (df) = 55, $p < 0.00$. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, indicating that the correlation patterns were relatively compact and the factors identified were distinct and reliable. Two items measuring social interactions with employees explained 65.85% of the overall variance. Cronbach's alpha for the total construct was 0.95 and scale reliability for the two dimensions was 0.94 and 0.90, respectively, indicating that the constructs were reliable and stable. The EFA of social interactions with customers yielded the following results: KMO = 0.79; Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2 = 282.02$; df = 6, $p < 0.00$. The eigenvalue was 2.60, and all of the items explained 65.07% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha for the total construct was 0.82. The EFA of loneliness yielded the following results: KMO = 0.92; Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2 = 526.58$; df = 15, $p < 0.00$. The eigenvalue was 3.65, and all of the items explained 60.86% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha for the total construct was 0.90.

Compared with Schmitt's (1999) study, the EFA of customer experience showed slight differences. We merged the items corresponding to two dimensions of customer experience developed by Schmitt (1999), think and sense, into one. We identified four dimensions: (1) sense and think—the customer's perceptions of satisfaction, excitement, and deep thinking; (2) relate—the customer's experience of a brand given a certain society and cultural environment; (3) feeling—the customer's feelings about an organization, its products, and its brands insofar as these feelings are induced by strategic methods; (4) act—the customer's tangible experience of developing habits and customs. The EFA results were as follows: KMO = 0.85; Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2 = 2,842.81$; $df = 253$, $p < 0.00$. Four items measuring customer experience explained 64.98% of the overall variance. Cronbach's alpha for the construct was 0.95 and the scale reliability of each dimension ranged from 0.81 to 0.90, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency. To analyze the influence of social interactions and customer experience on the reduction of loneliness, we reversed the score for loneliness.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

4.3 Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted (CFA) to validate the measurement models. We examined the measurement model with subsample B ($N = 215$), and it was found to be reliable and valid. The fit indices ($\chi^2 = 1499.56$, $df = 868$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, IFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06) suggested that the model fit was acceptable. As shown in Table 6, the AVE values of the overall measurement model exceeded 0.50, confirming the convergent validity. The AVE value of the overall measurement model was greater than the squared correlation coefficients for the corresponding inter-constructs, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

4.4 Structural model and hypotheses testing

Once we found the measurement model to be acceptable, we evaluated the structural model using all of the sample data. The model fit indices ($\chi^2 = 2045.54$, $df = 886$, $CFI = 0.91$, $TLI = 0.90$, $IFI = 0.91$, $RMSEA = 0.06$) indicated that the structural model represented an acceptable fit to the data. However, only the relationship between social interactions with employees and customer experience was significant in this model. As there are two factors in social interactions with employees, this study further explored the overall influence of social interactions with customers and the respective influence of each of the two factors of social interactions with employees on customer experience and loneliness to help determine the different contributions of each factor. The model fit indices of the final structural model were as follows: $\chi^2 = 2073.17$, $df = 885$, $CFI = 0.91$, $TLI = 0.90$, $IFI = 0.91$, $RMSEA = 0.06$. The results reflected a good fit between the final structural model and the data. Table 5 and Figure 2 show the final structural model and the standardized parameter estimates.

INSERT TABLE 5 AND FIGURE 2 HERE

After examining the model, we examined the proposed hypotheses by evaluating the path coefficients and significance levels. We used the C.R. to indicate whether the parameter estimates were statistically different from zero (Byrne, 2001). We present the results in Table 5. As predicted by H1, the standardized path coefficients from service manner and need identification to customer experience are 0.46 and 0.33, respectively, with C.R.s of 6.73 and 4.67 (above 1.96) and $p < 0.001$. Together, the path coefficients and significance level prove that social interactions with employees have a positive and significant effect on customer experience.

As predicted by H2, the standardized path coefficient between social interactions with customers and customer experience is positive (0.18) and statistically significant ($C.R. = 2.62 > 1.96, p < 0.01$). Therefore, social interactions with other customers have a positive and significant effect on customer experience. As predicted by H3, the standardized path coefficient between service manner and the reduction of loneliness is positive (0.41) and statistically significant ($C.R. = 3.01 > 1.96, p < 0.01$). However, the standardized path coefficient between need identification and the reduction of loneliness is negative (-0.15) and not significant ($C.R. = -1.11 < 1.96, p > 0.05$). With respect to H4, the standardized path coefficient between social interactions with customers and the reduction of loneliness is negative (0.24) but not significant ($C.R. = 1.84 < 1.96, p > 0.05$). With respect to H5, the standardized path coefficient between customer experience and the reduction of loneliness is negative (-0.24) but not significant ($C.R. = -1.49 < 1.96, p > 0.05$). Together, the standardized path coefficients and significance levels prove that only service manner has a positive influence on the reduction of loneliness.

We assessed the mediation hypotheses using the bootstrapping method. The standardized total effect of each of the two factors of social interactions with employees (service manner and need identification) on the reduction of loneliness was 0.30 and -0.23 respectively. The mediating effect of customer experience on the relationship between each of the two factors of social interactions with employees and the reduction of loneliness was -0.11 and -0.08 respectively, with respective Monte Carlo CIs of [-0.29, 0.05] and [-0.24, 0.03], which included zero. This suggested that the indirect effects of social interactions with employees on the reduction of loneliness were not significant, so H6 was not supported. Using the same method, the standardized total effect of social interactions with other customers on the reduction of

loneliness was 0.20. The mediating effect of customer experience on the relationship between social interactions with customers and the reduction of loneliness was not significant (standardized estimate = -0.04, 95% Monte Carlo CI [-0.19, 0.01]), which did not support H7.

INSERT TABLE 6 HERE

5 Summary and conclusions

5.1 Social interactions and customer experience

As expected, the two dimensions of social interactions with employees—service manner and need identification—had a significant and positive influence on seniors’ customer experience, thus supporting previous studies (e.g., Harris, 2007; Srivastava and Kaul, 2014; Pugh, 2001; Lloyd and Luk, 2011). Similarly, the respondents reported that social interactions with other customers could enhance their customer experience, a finding again consistent with those of other studies (e.g., Harris, 2007; Srivastava and Kaul, 2014; Pugh, 2001; Lloyd and Luk, 2011). Interestingly, the findings show that service manner was more effective than need identification in terms of improving the seniors’ customer experience. Lloyd and Luk (2011) similarly found that need identification had less effect on comfort than service manner had, possibly because service manner is relatively easy for service employees to produce, perform, and control (Dolen et al., 2004). Need identification, in contrast, requires service employees to anticipate customers’ needs clearly and to give required feedback, and hence employees may find it difficult to identify and satisfy customers’ needs without their cooperation or suggestions (Lloyd and Luk, 2011). Because customers may not indicate their needs or preferences precisely, service employees’ need identification behavior may not be accurate or leave a deep impression on some customers, especially less experienced ones.

This study also showed that social interactions with other customers significantly and positively influenced the seniors' customer experience (but to a lesser extent than service manner), thus supporting previous studies (e.g., Walls, 2013; Baron et al., 1996; Martin and Pranter, 1989). According to Surprenant and Solomon (1987), customer and employee are more mutually dependent and interact more in a service setting, and the closer relationship that results can help to improve customer experience, which may explain why the influence of social interactions with employees on customer experience is stronger than that of interactions with other customers. To conclude, this study is the first to empirically find that service manner is a more effective strategy for promoting seniors' customer experience than need identification and social interactions with other customers.

5.2 Social interactions and loneliness

Employees' service manner had a statistically significant and positive effect on reducing loneliness. However, the effect of employees' need identification on the reduction of loneliness was statistically insignificant, a rather surprising finding. This may suggest that employees' service manner is more important than their ability to identify the needs of senior customers in Hong Kong. This may be because service manner is easier for service employees to produce, perform, and control than need identification (Dolen et al., 2004) and thus may leave a deeper impression on customers and help to reduce their loneliness. The effect of social interactions with other customers on the reduction of loneliness was also insignificant in this study, perhaps due to Chinese cultural values, namely family orientation and kinship. According to Lovelock (1999), cultural values usually play a vital role in influencing human interactions in tourism and hospitality businesses. Family orientation and kinship constitute one element of Chinese interpersonal values. Chinese people tend to stay close to their families and are family-oriented

in their decisions (Cheng, 1997; Chan and Cheng, 2002; Zhang and Harwood, 2004; Qian et al., 2007; Hsu and Huang, 2016). Therefore, compared with seniors in Western countries, who pursue friendship ties rather than family ties (Kim et al., 2005), Chinese seniors may need family interactions more than social interactions with other customers in small hospitality businesses.

5.3 Customer experience and loneliness

Neither the effect of customer experience on the reduction of loneliness nor the mediating effect of customer experience on the relationship between social interactions and the reduction of loneliness was significant. This might also be related to Chinese seniors' value of family orientation and kinship. A study by Cheng et al. (2009) of Chinese seniors in Hong Kong reported that diverse and family-focused networks were most beneficial to seniors' well-being. This suggests that compared with family satisfaction supported by family ties and interactions, customer experience supported by social ties and interactions may play a weaker role in mitigating seniors' loneliness.

5.4 Implications and future research

5.4.1 Theoretical contributions

This study investigated how social interactions influence the experience of senior customers and whether such interactions reduce their loneliness. The first theoretical contribution of the study is its proposal of a new structural model. Based on the third place theory, this study highlights the importance of the social space created by the hospitality industry and is the first to compare the respective effects of two types of social interactions, with employees and with customers, in enhancing the hospitality customer experience and alleviating loneliness among

senior customers. Although some of the hypotheses were not supported by the empirical results, the proposed model helps to enrich the theoretical understanding of the relationship between social interactions, customer experience, and loneliness in third places. Second, this study demonstrates the role and importance of the hospitality industry in addressing a social problem. It is apparent that the ultimate goal of the hospitality service experience goes beyond merely providing a business transaction; this experience also plays an important role in addressing loneliness among senior customers.

5.4.2 Managerial implications

Although some of the hypotheses were not supported by the empirical results, the findings should help hospitality businesses, SME support organizations, elderly support organizations, and government policy makers work together to help seniors become more socially connected with the rest of the community and alleviate their loneliness.

First, the study offers insights into how small hospitality businesses can enhance senior customers' experience, help to reduce their social isolation, and alleviate their loneliness. In particular, small hospitality organizations should introduce staff training with a focus on the development of employees' interactions with customers, especially senior customers. In other words, service employees should be trained to be more professionally mannered and well groomed (Lloyd and Luk, 2013). The results of this study may also suggest that small hospitality businesses in Hong Kong should make employees' service manner the top priority to enhance their service quality. The employees of hospitality outlets must treat their customers in a respectful, patient, and friendly manner. As social interactions have an important influence on

customer experience, service providers must positively and proactively manage customer behavior to enhance senior customers' experience.

Second, this study demonstrates that loneliness as a social issue should be tackled not only through healthcare and psychological interventions, but also by commercial activities oriented toward experiential consumption. Most of the seniors preferred to walk to a nearby Cha Chaan Teng (94.4%), suggesting that small community-based hospitality businesses (e.g., restaurants and cafes) should make an effort to establish themselves next to elderly communities and should be encouraged to offer older consumers a comfortable and relaxing environment for social interactions. As there is clear evidence that lonely individuals enjoy the attention of personal service in the retail setting, Moschis (2003) suggests that mall retailers should hire older salesmen to increase interactions with senior customers. This study suggests that hospitality businesses may also consider hiring older employees, who better understand senior customers' needs and thus increase and improve personal interactions with senior customers.

Third, this study provides useful suggestions for encouraging senior customers' participation and involvement in hospitality services to prevent their loneliness. The findings suggest that emphasis should be placed on experiential consumption with a view to enhancing the quality of their social interactions with both service providers and other customers. It is highly likely that such experiential consumption will motivate seniors to visit hospitality businesses more often and thereby both make them more socially connected and generate revenue for the businesses, thus ultimately contributing to the growth of the local economy.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that small hospitality businesses could help senior customers feel safe, comfortable, and welcome through proper service manner and need

identification. Moreover, the results indicate that the distribution of training manuals for small hospitality business managers and employees may enhance their social interactions with senior customers and create the space and mechanisms needed to help senior customers to connect with other customers. Regulations should also be developed by the government in collaboration with small hospitality businesses to establish design requirements that include specifications for interactive spaces that create reasons for seniors to visit, stay, and enjoy their dining experiences.

5.4.3 Limitations and future research

This study may suffer from several limitations. A major flaw in the study is the use of an online survey, as some seniors may be less confident than others in the use of this kind of technology. Another limitation is the use of a convenience sampling frame using an online survey. A quota sampling method could be adopted to reduce possible bias in future research. Furthermore, this study did not consider the effect of cultural differences and cultural values on the relationships between social interactions, customer experience, and loneliness, which may affect the robustness of its findings. Besides, respondents' marital status was not taken into account. In this study, whether a senior customer visits a Cha Chaan Teng with his/her spouse may influence the result, because seniors' quantity and quality of social interactions and degree of loneliness may also be determined by their marital status (Cheng et al., 2009).

Future research could involve a comparative study of this topic across different cultural settings. In addition, cultural values, marital status, and other variables could be added to the proposed model as moderators to enhance the contribution of the study. The mediating effect of other variables (e.g., customer satisfaction, comfort, and service quality) on the relationship

between social interactions and loneliness could also be tested in the future. Moreover, as customer experience consists of four dimensions in this study, the relationship between each dimension of customer experience and other constructs is a matter for further study.

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