Fear and **anxiety** as hindrances to **restaurant experience** in the **post-viral world**: A qualitative study

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Abstract | This study explores consumers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the COVID-19 era to propose a model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during a pandemic. Therefore, it also examines the link between restaurant dining perceptions and experiences. Adopting a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with restaurant consumers and examined through content analysis. The findings reveal that consumers' fear and anxiety cause them to keep away from dining out at restaurants. Furthermore, restaurant experience is mainly determined by consumers' negative perceptions and restaurant choosing criteria. Finally, a model explaining the inter-relationships of restaurant dining perceptions, experiences, and restaurant selecting criteria was presented. This paper fills the gap in the literature by exploring Turkish customers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the COVID-19 health crisis. Understanding restaurant customers' dining perceptions and experiences will be beneficial for both scholars and practitioners to draw a picture of restaurant customers' perceptions and experiences during a pandemic.

Keywords | Restaurant dining perceptions, restaurant experience, fear and anxiety, restaurant choosing criteria

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1. Introduction

As one of the most affected hospitality businesses by the COVID-19 health crisis, the restaurant industry faced unprecedented and profound losses (Song et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic reduced restaurant sales, led millions of restaurant staff to lose their jobs and caused some restaurants to be closed temporarily or bankrupt (National Restaurant Association, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic has vastly disrupted restaurant consumers globally and locally (Brewer & Sebby, 2021) because consumers are afraid of dining out in restaurants, and changes in restaurant consumers' behaviours have occurred (Jiyoung et al., 2021).

According to Gursoy et al. (2020), instantly hosting customers back in restaurants will not be accessible after re-opening the businesses and removing the COVID-19 restrictions. In this line, various studies attempted to understand restaurant consumers' dining behaviours to develop strategies for returning restaurant consumers (Brewer & Sebby, 2021; Wei et al., 2021). Some studies (e.g. Hakim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021) emphasised that trust, safety measures, the state of crowdedness, and usage of technologies in restaurant services were considered substantial determinants that can positively impact consumers' intention to visit restaurants in the future.

In the research stream on the restaurant during the pandemic, significant studies focused on the factors that play a vital role in restaurant customers' re-intention to visit restaurants. In this regard, the role of perceived risk (Byrd et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021), safety measures (Hakim et al., 2021), dining involvement (Wei et al., 2021), brand trust (Wei et al., 2021), media exposure to COVID-19 (Sung et al., 2021), fear (Sung et al., 2021), online restaurant menus (Brewer & Sebby, 2021), and service quality (Sirimongkol, 2021) were mainly investigated by many scholars in different destinations. Moreover, dining-out mo-

tivations during COVID-19 (Zhong et al., 2021) is another research field which has drawn researchers' attention. However, the literature review on restaurants and COVID-19 lacks a sufficient investigation, especially the one which explores restaurant consumers' perceptions and experiences in a holistic approach. In this line of research, a recent study (Al-Marzouqi & Ben Yahia, 2021) suggests that further sound research is needed on restaurant consumers to capture their perceptions of restaurant dining during COVID-19.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, numerous countries have taken measures to restrict human interaction to prevent the virus's spread (Dandotiya, & Aggarwal, 2022; Atsız, 2021). These measures have severely hit the restaurant sector and brought the industry to a standstill. Although vaccine programs have been implemented worldwide and several countries have gradually begun to standardise coronavirus constraints, coronavirus cases and deaths are rising in some territories (Tanne, 2021). For example, Turkey applied lockdowns several times to reduce coronavirus cases. March-June 2021 were the months with the highest cases (over 60,000 daily), resulting in lockdowns a few times. This figure dropped to around 5,000 cases at the beginning of July 2021. However, the recorded cases were over 22,000 as of 28th July 2021 (Worldometer, 2021), even though vaccine programs started in January 2021. At this point, it is worth measuring the impact of the virus on restaurant consumers by understanding their experiences and perceptions of COVID-19. These attempts will provide insightful findings to the industry. Thus, the restaurant industry may be able to understand the current and future customers' perceptions and experiences and accordingly position themselves in the post(viral) world to cope with the ever-increasing challenges and recover.

Accordingly, this paper aims to fill the mentioned gap by exploring Turkish customers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the global health crisis. Understanding restaurant cus-

tomers' dining perceptions and experiences will benefit scholars and practitioners. Besides, knowing dining experiences and perceptions would help restaurant managers and/or owners create proactive strategies toward other health crises in the future.

2. Literature review

2.1 Restaurants in the COVID-19 era

Due to COVID-19, seated diners in restaurants decreased (Statista, 2021), although the food delivery sector's market share increased. A report illustrating the state of the restaurant businesses announced that more than 110,000 food and beverage businesses were closed, and a significant revenue loss occurred. In addition, most restaurant consumers prefer food delivery services (National Restaurant Association, 2021).

To revive the industry and bring consumers back to restaurants, restaurateurs have applied safety measures such as wearing a mask, washing hands, keeping clean around immediately, limiting seats, using technological tools, etc. These precautions enable consumers to have a feeling of safety in the restaurant landscape. However, although some measures have been taken, fear and anxiety related to COVID-19 still exist among restaurant consumers. For this reason, restaurant trust is crucial in consumers' dining decisions (Sirimongkol, 2021). Many restaurants have used social media platforms to inform consumers about their measures, such as safety and hygiene protocols, to build confidence (Sung et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2020).

Restaurants in Turkey have been harshly hit by COVID-19 (Deloitte, 2020). Nevertheless, according to a report (Metro, 2020), Turkish consumers can re-visit the restaurants provided some conditions are met, notably using personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, provi-

ding disinfections, offering open-air service, contactless payment, checking consumers and employees' temperature, devise single-use materials, while taking videos that illustrate the sterilisation stages, and prohibiting extensive group visits. In this respect, İflazoğlu and Aksoy (2020) stated that most Turkish consumers are willing to pay more attention to safety and health measures during COVID-19. However, no study in the literature provides insightful perspectives on restaurant customers' perceptions and experiences of restaurants in the COVID-19 era. Hence, for the sake of the industry, more research on restaurant consumers is needed to understand customers' perceptions and experiences in detail to provide theoretical and practical implications.

2.2. Consumers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences in the viral world

A crisis like COVID-19 can trigger transformations in the tourism stakeholders' behavioural, cognitive, emotional, psychological, and even ideological drivers (Sigala, 2020). Laguna et al. (2020) pointed out that consumer decisions regarding food consumption have changed due to the changes in consumers' daily lives, which are culturally and socially affected by concerns regarding COVID-19 (e.g., lockdowns, social distancing, and uncertainty for the future). For instance, contamination risk perception disrupts consumer trust in restaurant businesses regarding hygiene and sanitation (Byrd et al., 2021). Thus, consumer attitudes and dining out behaviour were also systematically affected (Bivona & Cruz, 2021). In this respect, some recent studies (e.g., de Andrade et al., 2019; Hakim et al., 2021; Jiyoung Kim et al., 2021) highlighted the importance of branded and well-known restaurants in terms of consumer trust for visiting intention during the COVID-19 era. For example, a current study by Kim et al. (2021) noted that branded restaurants have more

sales margins than non-branded restaurants amid COVID-19.

Additionally, studies (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021) show that restaurant consumers are sensitive to crowdedness due to the risk of infection. More relatedly, a study by Kim and Lee (2020) demonstrated that consumers who perceive the pandemic as a threat are more likely to prefer restaurants with private dining facilities. Further, a study (Tuzovic et al., 2021) on consumers' dining experiences and well-being perceptions during the social distancing practice found that hygiene and safety in restaurants were important measures to reduce uncertainty. Wei et al. (2022) indicated that while preventive measures and brand trust could attract customers to dine out in restaurants, perceived risk can disrupt customers' dining-out intention.

Al-Marzouqi and Yahia (2021) found that negative perceptions of COVID-19 influence service quality performance, but restaurants can decrease the negative impacts and enhance service quality performance by complying with health measures. Therefore, restaurant consumers can be satisfied with their experience and visit or recommend the restaurant they visited. In addition, consumers acknowledge restaurants as a social interaction area as risky due to infection risk (Sontag, 2020). Since consumers perceived dining in restaurants as unsafe, they preferred "delivery" and "take-away" services to keep away from virus transmission (Jia, 2021).

Research examining restaurant consumers psychologically (Song et al., 2021) found that protective wear and social interaction levels can determine their risk perception. Also, crowdedness and safety measures in restaurants played a critical role in shaping consumers' choices and perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, restaurant consumers may not consider these measures since they are interested in and value dining out. Consequently, their intention to visit restaurants can be higher than sensitive consumers (Wei et al., 2021).

The pandemic negatively affected restaurant consumers' perception of dining out behaviour. Besides, customers' perceptions of restaurants can positively or negatively impact their dining intentions and experiences. Nevertheless, safety and health measures will be among the most important ones to enrich restaurant consumers' experience (National Restaurant Association, 2021) because these measures may decrease customers' fear and anxiety.

We proposed that COVID -19 has led to fear and anxiety among customers, which, in turn, impacted their overall experience and perceptions. Hence, the theoretical framework applied in this research serves the role as to examine customers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the global health crisis in the Turkish hospitality market context. In this line, the present research frames its theoretical understanding based on the health crisis, which can have a determining role on individuals' restaurant experience, thus requiring to re-visit which restaurant selection criteria and customers' perceptions shape their overall experiences in restaurants.

3. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study method to analyse the phenomenon. This approach helps researchers better understand participants' feelings, opinions, and behaviour to detect the significant aspects for analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Chen, 2010). The research investigates consumer restaurant dining perceptions and experiences in the COVID-19 era. According to the purpose of this research, Turkish consumers were selected for a case study. Case studies are among the most suitable techniques to analyse a detailed description of the setting or individuals (Creswell, 2009). Such studies provide researchers to enhance deep

knowledge of phenomena of a specific context, therefore, do not need to present any generalisations on research units (Komppula, 2014). Moreover, according to Gjerald (2005), case studies are "particularistic", "descriptive", "heuristic", and "inductive". So, case studies offer scholars opportunities to explore new theoretical insights into an issue tackled by any research through such characteristics.

3.1. Research participants, data collection and analysis

The research data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with Turkish consumers who had experienced restaurant dining during the COVID-19 period. Interviews were conducted between March-May 2021. Further, given the COVID-19, the participants were interviewed through online platforms (i.e., Zoom, WhatsApp, etc.) because face-to-face interviews were not desirable under the COVID-19 circumstances. Before gathering the data, the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) was determined and reviewed by researchers with knowledge and experience to provide for interview questions' readability and consistency with the current research objective. After this process, the participants who met the criteria set out in this study (individuals with high motivation toward gastronomy and restaurant dining and who experienced restaurant dining at least once during the pandemic) were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Then, a formal e-mail was sent to targeted participants for approving and voluntarily participating in this research. After taking their approval, the researchers initiated conducting interviews.

A pilot study was conducted with two participants for the appropriateness of the questions and to make some suggestions on the practicability of the research (Williams-Mcbean, 2019). The pilot study aims to develop the interview questions'

validity (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). After this process, the transcribed data of the pilot study were examined and discussed among researchers. Following this stage, the interviews were conducted and digitally recorded with the participant's consent. Though there is no clear consensus in qualitative research on the precise number of interviews for reliability issues, it is emphasised that participants number between 5 and 50 are adequate for this type of research (Dworkin, 2012).

Further, the required number of participants depends on data saturation, availability of the targeted sample and time (Marshall et al., 2013). Since no further information will be provided and similar results will be replicated, the authors agreed that the data became saturated and stopped collecting data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Hence, 27 participants were included in this study (see Table 1). The average of interviews took 27 minutes, and the voice records were transcribed for further analysis.

The elicited data were examined through content analysis. As a data reduction strategy, a coding procedure was applied by three independent coders. The coding process started with reading the transcribed data several times at the initial stage. Secondly, researchers coded the text to occur indicators or sub-themes. Afterwards, they formed themes that may describe Turkish consumers' restaurant dining perceptions and experiences in the COVID-19 era. Each coder applied this process separately. Finally, the coders compared the themes they revealed until reaching a consensus on specific themes.

Table 1 | Profile of Participants

Participants	Gender	Age group	Education	Employment
P1	Female	41-50	Bachelor	Real estate agent
P2	Female	41-50	Master's	Language coach
P3	Female	above 50	Master's	Language coach
P4	Male	31-40	PhD	Academician
P5	Female	31-40	Master's	Winemaker
P6	Female	above 50	Master's	Food researcher
P7	Female	41-50	PhD	Academician
P8	Female	41-50	College	F&B manager
P9	Female	above 50	Master's	Nurse
P10	Female	31-40	Master's	Room division manager
P11	Female	above 50	Master's	Academician
P12	Male	above 50	Bachelor	Local guide
P13	Male	20-30	Master's	Trainer-chef
P14	Female	31-40	Bachelor	Cook
P15	Male	31-40	Master's	Academician
P16	Male	above 50	PhD	Academician
P17	Male	31-40	Bachelor	Consultant
P18	Female	20-30	Bachelor	Cook
P19	Female	20-30	Master's	Academician
P20	Male	20-30	Master's	Business owner
P21	Male	41-50	Master's	Consultant
P22	Female	31-40	Master's	Tourism industry employee
P23	Female	31-40	Master's	Food designer
P24	Male	31-40	Bachelor	Consultant
P25	Male	above 50	High school	Consultant
P26	Female	31-40	Bachelor	Tourism industry employee
P27	Female	41-50	Master's	Cook

4. Results and discussion

According to the data analysis of participants, the findings were classified into three major themes: fear and anxiety, restaurant choosing criteria, and restaurant experience. Furthermore, the model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the pandemic is also presented based on the relationships between the extracted themes and sub-themes.

4.1. Fear and anxiety

Based on the protective behaviours towards the virus during the pandemic, consumers feel a high level of fear and anxiety, leading them to change their dining-out perspectives. The first and the most critical issue that fear and anxiety caused was avoidance of restaurant dining in the COVID-19 era. Most participants hint that they prefer eating at home instead of dining in restaurants because they have a high fear and anxiety, which evokes

protective behaviours. For instance, participant 1 (P1) says, "The current pandemic has definitely affected my perceptions of restaurant dining. I started eating at home as much as possible to protect myself. I started not dining in restaurants unless I had to...". In addition, P22 also implies that they have recently hardly dined in a restaurant, but they used to eat at least a few times a week before the pandemic.

Fear and anxiety also cause avoidance from the crowd. Participants' statements illustrate that one of the main reasons preventing them from restaurant dining is their unwillingness to be in the crowd. Since the pandemic started, participants have favoured keeping their physical distance. Regarding avoidance from the crowd during the pandemic, P18 stressed that before the pandemic, she liked to be in the crowd and socialise with people in dining environments (i.e., restaurants); however, since the pandemic started, she did not want to be in a crowd and have close physical contact

with people. The related statements of participant 23 are given below.

> "...In this period, our perception of restaurant dining has changed under the effect of hygiene and safety concerns... We've started avoiding the crowds when dining in a restaurant... I feel anxiety and fear... The most worrying part of restaurant dining is the crowd... Especially in a closed dining hall when taking the masks out". P23

The findings also show that participants are more sensitive to details when dining in restaurants in the COVID-19 era. Participants indicated that before the pandemic, they were not worrying about minor details such as whether the servers' hands touched inside plates, when the server changed their gloves, how they cooked the food, how the kitchen staff worked, whether the dishes were sterilised, etc. In this regard, P3 says, "...We started to pay attention to the points we did not consider before. For example, whether the waiter's hand touches the inside of the plate or if the waiter is wearing gloves... we were stuck with such concerns and questions...".

Participants assert that they doubt restaurants' safety because of fear and anxiety. For instance, P14 expressed that "...we have doubts about the safety in restaurants...even if they say they are disinfecting, even if they have a safe tourism certificate, we still have doubts. There are cases where the waiters do not wear masks in some places, there is no social distance, and the tables are not disinfected, which raises doubts". In addition, another consumer (P24) remarks that the pandemic has dramatically affected restaurant dining behaviours because of the fear and doubts about restaurants' safety. He further states that rumours about virus transmission also cause these doubts. Moreover, P26 also expressed the related statements:

> "I can no longer eat in any restaurant.

> Even though I want to consume a lot, unfortunately, I cannot eat because I cannot trust restaurants. For example, I doubt how vegetables and fruits are washed and how meat is prepared. Unfortunately, I have doubts about the hygiene of the staff... Let's say I trust a restaurant and go to eat. But the fact that the tables are close to each other and that everyone takes off their masks because they are going to eat, even if it is open-air, makes me nervous". P26

In this study, consumers' preventive behaviour can be explained as avoiding dining in restaurants to lessen physical contact with people (Yang et al., 2020). Individuals' disease-protective behaviour refers to the risk perceptions and health beliefs evoked by fear and anxiety (Champion & Skinner, 2008). These risk perceptions could be a substantial barrier for consumers to avoid dining out during the pandemic. In this regard, a pandemic may cause high anxiety for some people, especially those with health anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Dennis et al., 2021).

Anxiety is a mental disorder that includes cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and physiological dimensions (Zenker et al., 2021). Anxiety, the driver of significant actions when danger is present, can promote behaviours geared toward protecting well-being and health (Dennis et al., 2021). Since the pandemic is continuing worldwide and many things are unknown, there is a massive spread of different pieces of information in every country. So, the unapproved ones and the rumours can create anxiety in several communities (Hakim et al., 2021). Besides, the anxiety in the COVID-19 era is termed coronaphobia or coronavirus anxiety (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020). Coronavirus anxiety may strongly affect consumers' psychology because this virus is highly transmissible and threatens lives. Additionally, many people carrying the virus may not have any symptoms. Consequently, this situation can result in fear, evoke anxiety, and

influence consumer behaviours.

4.2 Restaurant selection criteria

Generally, pandemics create fear and anxiety that force individuals to avoid being among people based on the perceived threat of pathogens (Kim & Lee, 2020). Thus, it is critical to understand how the perceived threat of COVID-19 affects consumer behaviours, including the preferred criteria for choosing restaurants. Accordingly, knowing these behavioural changes and expectations (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020b) and providing products and services safely (Seyitoğlu et al., 2021a) are critical aspects of hospitality services during the pandemic. Moreover, the theme restaurant selection criteria revealed according to the data analysis are significant. During the current pandemic, fear and anxiety have a determining role in shaping these criteria among consumers.

The participants indicate that during COVID-19, their restaurant choosing criteria are re-shaped and primarily based on health and safety issues. The requirements stressed by the participating consumers: hygiene and cleaning, compliance with the protective measures in restaurants (such as distancing, using masks, and sanitation), reliable and known restaurants, open-air service, and the health of the restaurant staff (i.e., having an infection or not, vaccinated or not), and uncrowded atmosphere.

Hygiene and cleaning are the main issues of restaurant choosing criteria. Another significant criterion in choosing restaurants is compliance with protective measures such as distancing, using masks, and sanitation. Restaurant staff's state of health follows these two criteria as another big issue. In this respect, P1 states, "Now, the most important criterion for me is hygiene when choosing a restaurant to dine at. Besides, the health of the person who prepares food... dishwasher. These are the things that I care about recently...".

Participants remarked that the open-air service environment is also crucial. They feel more comfortable dining in restaurants during the pandemic in an open-air service environment. Furthermore, participants prefer a less crowded atmosphere when choosing a restaurant in the COVID-19 era. For instance, P16 said, "COVID-19 changed my preference in restaurant dining like this: I stopped visiting restaurants having closed and crowded atmospheres". Moreover, P20 also asserts that he prefers open-air service environments with a high psychical distance from other customers.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that most research participants prefer *reliable* and *known* restaurants. They feel more secure when eating in restaurants that they know and ensure their safety. In this aspect, P11 says, "Recently, I go to the restaurants that I trust more that comply with the cleaning rules... In the pandemic, it has been a priority for me to go to the restaurants that I find reliable". More statements are given as follows:

> "First and foremost, we do not want to eat indoors, so if I go to a place, I pay attention to whether they have an open-air area. Whether it is wide enough...Is it crowded?... We're looking at different things as priorities now..." P5

According to the literature, hygiene was also essential for choosing a restaurant before the pandemic (Sirimongkol, 2021). The characteristics of employees related to cleanliness and hygiene are significant for restaurant patrons in terms of their dining decisions (Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007). Also, consumers are likely to choose different restaurants when they are not convinced about restaurant safety (DiPietro, 2017).

The findings of Hakim et al. (2021) illustrate that trust in a restaurant and brand is one of the most critical factors in predicting restaurant visiting intention in the COVID-19 era. The known restaurants are perceived as trustworthy; thus, patrons assess the risk of eating in these restaurants

as low as eating in their homes (de Andrade et al., 2019). Furthermore, a research (Kim et al., 2021) expressed that branded restaurants have a more significant sales margin than non-branded restaurants during the current pandemic.

Another study (Wang et al., 2021) demonstrated that restaurant patrons are sensitive to crowdedness during the pandemic, which can strongly impact their dining choices. Since individuals in crowded restaurant environments are at risk of being infected, they may have safety concerns related to the crowdedness, especially in a closed environment (Li et al., 2021). Therefore, as crowdedness has a critical role in the current pandemic, reducing or eliminating the crowdedness may also decrease the perceived health risks and attract potential patrons.

4.3 Restaurant experience

Restaurant experience during COVID-19 includes positive and negative aspects. However, the negative aspects are more dominant than the positive ones. Negative factors include a lack of hedonic experience, feeling insecure, feeling pressure to eat fast, lack of comfort, and socialising. In accordance with the views shared by participants, these aspects are caused mainly by the fear and anxiety of the current virus. On the flip side, there are positive aspects such as open-air service, compliance with protective measures in restaurants (such as distancing, using masks, and sanitation), reliable and known restaurants, and an uncrowded atmosphere. These positive dimensions are the criteria that participants remarked as indicators of their restaurant choices during the pandemic.

Considering the negative issues that decrease the quality of experience pointed out by participants, lack of hedonic experience is one of the most critical issues which can be regarded as an indicator of restaurant experience in the COVID-19 era. Many participants claim they could not

enjoy their restaurant experience during the pandemic because they concentrated more on virus transmission. For instance, P1 says, "I was eating in a restaurant today. There were few people around me. But I couldn't enjoy the food like I used to. Your pleasure from eating is reducing because of the anxiety... So, I thought about it today that how lucky we were in the past".

Besides, feeling insecure and pressured to eat fast in restaurants during the pandemic are other negative aspects that decrease the quality of consumer experience. In this sense, P21 mentioned, "The anxiety-based instinct of feeling insecure was more dominant, even though there were places I knew. I wonder if the cook is infected or not...whether the person on my left or right has the virus or not...My experience was full of these thoughts...".

This study also confirms that the lack of comfort and socialising negatively affects the quality of the restaurant experience quality. P15 implies that he feels uncomfortable during his dining experiences because of the pandemic. P18 says, "...when we went to a restaurant with friends, we had dining experiences for a longer time with conversations and chatting. But now we're in let's eat and leave mode. Even in an open-air environment, we feel that we are in touch with the virus when sitting. That's why our restaurant experience is faster now... when we go to the restaurant, there is, of course, anxiety. There is no comfort...".

Although the negative aspects are more dominant, there are also positive aspects: compliance with the protective measures in restaurants, open-air service, reliable and known restaurants, and less crowded atmosphere. According to the participants' responses, these aspects increase restaurant experience quality. For example, participant 12 stated they did not feel much fear or anxiety in their restaurant dining experience because they visited a known and reliable restaurant which followed the protective measures. Though more negative sides occurred in restaurant dining during

the pandemic, these aspects increased the quality of their restaurant experience. In connection with this, P13 implies that he enjoyed his restaurant experience with friends because it was an open-air service environment.

Customer experience is the overall experience obtained through the interaction of consumers and service providers and can somewhat affect the decisions and behaviours towards the services (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020a). Hence, knowing the restaurant experience of patrons is vital for the success of restaurant operations. Although the restaurant dining experience includes diverse factors such as location, service staff, environment, cleanliness, decor, menu, atmosphere, and food taste (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Heung & Gu, 2012), in the COVID-19 era, consumers concentrate only on health-related issues such as hygiene and cleaning of the restaurant staff, etc.

4.4 The model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the COVID-19

Considering the relationships between the themes and sub-themes of the findings, the model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during COVID-19 is developed (Figure 1). First, as it is known, COVID-19 caused a worldwide pandemic with significant health, social and economic impacts on countries. It has caused fear and anxiety, leading to protective behavioural changes (Dennis et al., 2021). In our model, first, fear and anxiety form restaurant dining perceptions of customers. Additionally, as the primary indicator of restaurant dining perceptions, fear and anxiety lead to restaurant dining perceptions such as avoidance from the crowd, avoidance from restaurant dining, being more sensitive to details, and being doubtful about restaurants' safety.

Furthermore, the protective behaviour based on fear and anxiety about losing health in the COVID-19 era enables consumers to determine their restaurant choosing criteria. Accordingly, consumers expected to find these criteria (hygiene and cleaning, reliable and known restaurants, the health of the restaurant staff, compliance with protective measures in restaurants, open-air service, and uncrowded atmosphere) when deciding to dine in a restaurant during the pandemic. These are the attributes that consumers are willing to see in a restaurant in the viral world.

The second part of the model comprises the restaurant experience in the COVID-19 era, including the positive aspects, negative aspects, and their influence on the quality of the restaurant experience. It can be understood from the model (see Figure 1) that those negative restaurant aspects that are the outcome of fear and anxiety include a lack of hedonic experience, feeling insecure, feeling pressure to eat fast, lack of comfort, and lack of socialising. These aspects decrease the quality of restaurant patrons' experience during the pandemic. For example, Participant 1 indicated that they could not feel the taste and enjoy the food in the restaurant because of fear and anxiety. She further implied that fear and anxiety negatively affected their hedonic experience.

There are also positive aspects such as compliance with protective measures, open-air service, an uncrowded atmosphere, and reliable and known restaurants that increase the quality of the restaurant experience. In addition, some research participants did not feel fear and anxiety due to these aspects. For this reason, on the one hand, these positive aspects decreased the fear and anxiety of consumers; on the other hand, they increased customers' experience quality. However, in some cases, while fear and anxiety caused some negative aspects, which decreased consumers' experience quality, at the same time, positive aspects decreased their anxiety and thus increased their experience quality. In this vein, P12 says that "…Of course, I did not sit in the restaurant and eat for a long time… I paid attention to eating in places with open-air service. I did not think about eating

inside. Even in open-air areas, the service was not as pleasant as it used to be. It is a fast service... However, it is a place I have been to before, so I was not worried. Because they followed the rules very well, it was not a problem for me. I saw that they followed the rules...".

The further clues that demonstrate the relationships between negative aspects, positive aspects, fear and anxiety, and quality of service can be presented as:

"I did not have any concerns while eating in the restaurant. Because the service area was completely open-air, and the ta-

bles had enough distance". P20

"I enjoyed my restaurant experience immensely. It was a pleasant experience. I had no worries. We went to the restaurant with two friends, and we sat diagonally. The servers were masked and gloved...the fear and anxiety decrease when the rules are followed". P25

To conclude, the model illustrates that the findings of this study have inter-relationships that shape restaurant dining perceptions and experiences.
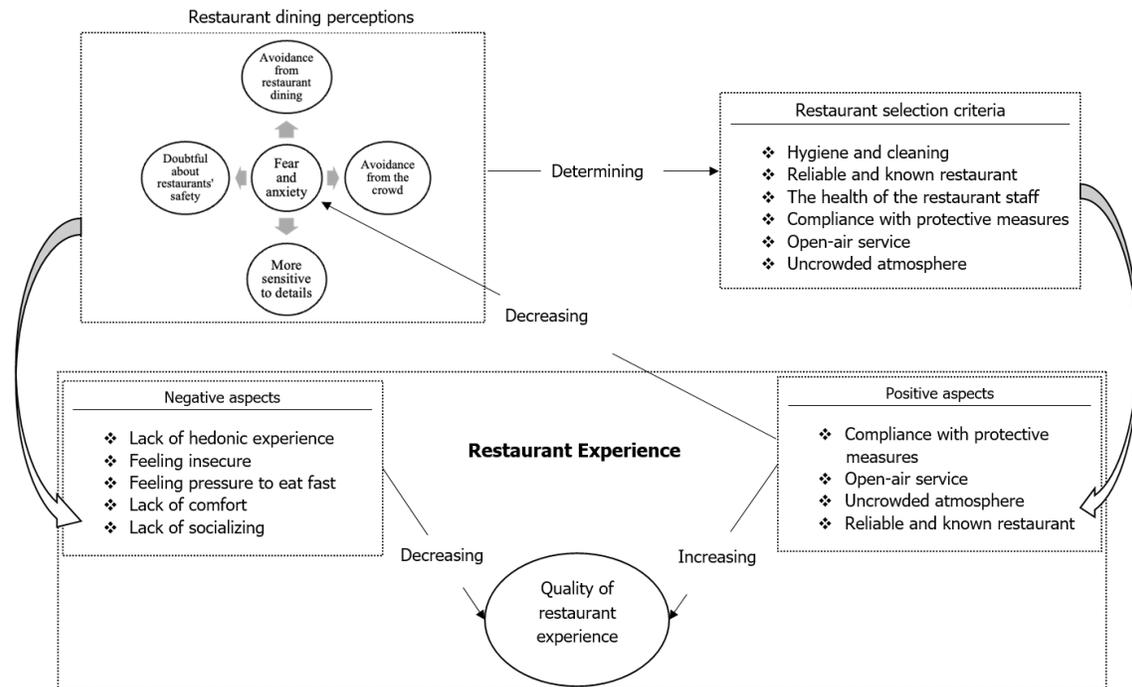

Figure 1 | The model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during the pandemic (2020-2021)

5. Conclusion

This study investigated restaurant dining perceptions and experiences of consumers during COVID-19. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were held with Turkish restaurant consumers and analysed. The findings from our data analysis revealed three major themes: fear and anxiety (avoidance from restaurant dining, avoidance from the crowd, more sensitive to details, and doubtful about restaurants' safety), restaurant choosing criteria (hygiene and cleaning, reliable and known restaurant, the health of restaurant staff, compliance with protective measures, open-air service,

and uncrowded atmosphere), and restaurant experience (negative aspects and positive aspects). Besides, following the relationships between these themes and their sub-themes, the model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences during COVID-19 is provided.

As this paper is the first to investigate in detail restaurant dining perceptions and experiences of consumers during the pandemic and provide related empirical results, and no such study could be found in the literature, these findings are original. Furthermore, the results and provided model may help restaurant managers to design quality experiences by addressing the desired attributes that can decrease the fear and anxiety of customers in the viral world.

Theoretical and managerial implications

First, it is clear from the model (see Figure 1) that fear and anxiety are critical and shape restaurant dining perceptions. These perceptions determine the consumers' restaurant's choosing criteria. The fear and anxiety and restaurant choosing criteria are the indicators of positive and negative aspects of the restaurant experience during the pandemic. While negative aspects decrease the experience quality, positive aspects increase the experience quality by reducing fear and anxiety. Therefore, restaurant businesses should spend a significant effort to decrease fear and anxiety to create positive restaurant dining perceptions. In this regard, restaurants should address the choosing criteria of consumers in the viral world to provide them with positive aspects that can increase their experience quality because the fewer negative issues customers have, the higher quality of their experience will be. Restaurants can also benefit from service robots to provide contactless or limited-contacted services in the viral epoch (Seyitoğlu et al., 2021b).

As it is still not empirically known in detail which criteria determine consumers' selection behaviours toward restaurants during the pandemic, the findings of this study are critical in understanding the subject. More specifically, restaurant choosing criteria can be termed as expected restaurant attributes from suppliers' perspectives. Restaurant attributes can be classified as food, ambience, and service-related attributes that determine restaurant service quality (Ryu et al., 2012). However, according to the findings of this study, participants are seeking hygiene and cleaning, the health of restaurant staff, open-air service, an uncrowded atmosphere, and reliable and known places during the COVID-19 health crisis. Thence, it can be concluded that consumers focus more on ambience and service-related attributes in the viral world. Considering these expectations, restaurants may obtain consumers' trust towards restaurant dining in the COVID-19 era.

It is stated in the literature that consumers' purchase behaviour is mainly assessed according to the service attributes (Hakim et al., 2021). Moreover, customer perceptions of restaurant attributes are crucial in understanding their behaviours (Ingerson & Kim, 2016). Consequently, knowing the criteria pointed out by participants may help restaurant managers design and adapt the restaurant attributes to address consumers' desires during the COVID-19 or a similar health crisis. Furthermore, understanding these criteria is also critical to create proactive behaviours in any health crisis in the future.

Since the consumers' fear and anxiety are based on health concerns, restaurant businesses should focus on safety protocols and convince potential patrons of this aspect. The related literature also supports that restaurant businesses should ensure customer safety, which is a prior expectation during the pandemic (Bove & Benoit, 2020). Additionally, as consumers also care about the health of restaurant staff, restaurants should also protect their employees' health (Sirimongkol, 2021). Besides, developing and providing the attributes, inclu-

ding the mentioned criteria, that can build the confidence of potential customers would attract them to dine in restaurants during COVID-19. In this regard, restaurants would provide more positive aspects (which contain non or a low degree of fear and anxiety) and enable a high-quality experience.

Limitations and research directions

Though the present paper is the first to investigate restaurant dining perceptions and experiences of consumers during COVID-19 and provides a model of restaurant dining perceptions and experiences, it has some limitations. First, the findings include the data of 27 Turkish consumers, and thus, the results cannot be generalised or applied widely because they only represent a single qualitative case. Therefore, the results may not apply to all Turkish restaurant customers in Turkey. Future research may use a quantitative approach and present more generalisable findings in Turkish and other countries' contexts to expand these findings further. Moreover, researchers may also apply comparative studies to understand the perspectives and experiences of consumers more broadly.

Additionally, since it is still unknown whether consumers' perspectives will change after the pandemic in the post-viral world, future studies can explore the restaurant dining perspectives and experiences of consumers when the pandemic alert is over. Scholars could also reveal the usefulness of restaurant applications to attract visitors and the level of fear and anxiety towards restaurant dining in the post-viral world.

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Appendix 1

1. Did the current pandemic affect your perceptions of dining out?
2. Do you feel any fear or anxiety about dining in a restaurant?
3. Currently, what are the things (criteria) that you consider when choosing a restaurant?
4. Have you dined out in a restaurant since the pandemic started?
    -If yes, how was your experience, did you enjoy it, and did you have any concerns (fear, anxiety)?
    -If not, why? What are the reasons not to dine in a restaurant during the current pandemic?