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## Reflection: Airbnb's food-related "online experiences": a recipe for connection and escape

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### ABSTRACT

During the global COVID pandemic, cooking and baking have reemerged as popular at-home pastimes. In this essay, we focus on digital cooking classes offered by Airbnb. Responding to restrictions on physical mobility, as well as to the sudden demand for leisure activities which could be experienced from one's home, in early April 2020, Airbnb launched a new service called "Online Experiences" (OEs). While the types of OEs offered on the platform are varied, approximately 30% center around digitally mediated food-preparation. Through our thematic analysis of consumer reviews of OEs, we explore how participants perceive and conceptualize these new digital food-related experiences. Our close analysis of review texts finds that many OE participants discuss these online food activities in terms of digital commensality, highlighting the social connectedness promoted by the act of cooking or baking when performed as a joint action online. In this innovative context, online food-related experiences appear to also stimulate a sense of 'virtual travel.'

### KEYWORDS

COVID-19; online cooking classes; digital commensality; virtual escape; online consumer reviews; Airbnb Online Experiences

### Introduction

Worldwide restrictions on mobility in response to COVID-19 have profoundly affected daily routines and activities. At the time of writing, travel restrictions and recommendations for social distancing are in place in many countries across the globe. During this time of crisis, cooking and baking have emerged as popular home-bound pastimes (Easterbrook-Smith 2020). Journalists and researchers have reported that many individuals have been spending more time cooking during quarantine than before, describing this activity as relaxing, fun and fulfilling (Taparia 2020). At the same time, limiting physical contact with others has resulted in a greater reliance on digital technologies to not only carry out professional tasks but also to socialize. In particular, virtual conferencing technologies (such as Zoom or Skype) are being used to maintain social connectedness with friends, family and colleagues around the globe.

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As individuals and researchers, we have experienced and observed these changes in leisure activities and communicative practices. As scholars of digital communication with a special interest in both tourism and food discourse, we discovered Airbnb's creative business adaptation to COVID, which involves digital communication centering around food-related practices. Responding to restrictions on physical mobility as well as to the sudden demand for leisure pastimes that could be experienced from the comfort of one's home, in early April 2020, Airbnb launched a new service called "Online Experiences" (OEs). With this development, Airbnb – a business whose success was built on offering peer-to-peer accommodations – expanded into virtual tourism, placing food- and drink-related experiences at center stage. Partnering with Zoom, Airbnb provides a platform through which hosts<sup>1</sup> can connect with a small group of guests (who can be located anywhere in the world) and provide 60-90 minute virtual experiences. Types of OEs are diverse, ranging from virtual concerts, to meditation classes, to coaching sessions with Olympic athletes. Of the experiences offered (now over 600), 32% are related to food. Among the most popular format of OEs offered, these typically involve cooking, baking, food-preparation, or food/beverage tasting. Some examples include lessons in pasta-making with an Italian grandmother, baking cinnamon rolls with a Swedish pastry expert, or making various salsas with a Mexican chef.

Building on our expertise in the areas of digital food discourse and online consumer reviews, in this essay we explore consumer reviews of Airbnb's food-related OEs, to discover what they might reveal about food-related social practices and digitally mediated processes that are uniquely situated within the broader context of the current global pandemic. This work contributes to growing interest in the interaction between food, language and larger cultural/social practices (Blackburn, Yilmaz, and Boyd 2018; Leer and Krogager, 2021; Tovares and Gordon 2021). We became particularly interested in how consumers were describing the sense of sociality, commensality and virtual escape/travel generated by these virtual food-preparation experiences they had participated in during a time when physical mobility and global travel were most restricted. To approach this topic systematically, we conducted a thematic analysis of 100 food-related OE reviews, focusing especially on the notion of digital commensality.

### ***Digital commensality***

"Digital commensality" refers to scenarios in which digital technology is incorporated into/around mealtime activities (Spence, Mancini, and Huisman 2019). At present, "Mukbang" and "Skeating" are some of the digitally-mediated mealtime practices that have captured the attention of

food scholars. “Mukbang” is a Korean term which refers to eating by oneself while watching someone else eating via a livestreaming website. Choe (2019) has described how Mukbang hosts eat while interacting with viewers via live online chat – thereby creating an interactive shared mealtime experience. Although this shared experience occurs as a virtual interaction, Mukbang realizes the cultural value of ‘sharing a table,’ which is particularly appreciated in Korea (as well as in other parts of the world), and creates a sense of commensality between the participants – a key factor in its success and popularity. A recent survey (Anjani et al. 2020) found diverse motivations for Mukbang viewing; among these, the multisensory nature of Mukbang as well as a perceived social relationship with Mukbangers were prominent in participants’ responses.

Skeating – or Skyping with a remotely-located loved one or friend, while eating – is another example of digital commensality. According to Spence, Mancini, and Huisman (2019) this practice has become widespread, and preliminary studies stress the importance of the synchronization of the dining (as opposed to, for instance, watching pre-recording of a person dining), as fundamental to having a realistic and fulfilling co-dining experience. Both of these practices could potentially provide the benefits of co-dining for individuals in separate geographical locations (Spence, Mancini, and Huisman 2019).

This essay contributes to the emerging scholarship on digitally mediated food-centered activities as practices of digital commensality. Unlike digitally mediated *eating* activities such as Mukbang or Skeating, our discussion here concerns the digital-mediated practices of *preparing/making* food. By investigating reviews of food-related OEs, we explore how a sense of sociality is conceptualized by participants in this newer, digitally mediated food-related experience. Although it could be argued that participating in Mukbang or Skeating may exacerbate solitude as much as it helps to alleviate it, the current circumstances brought on by the pandemic have made us increasingly reliant on digital technologies for much of our interaction, while at the same time highlighting the strong human need to connect with others socially. Unlike Mukbang and Skeating, food-related OEs emphasize gastronomic production over consumption. However, like Mukbang and Skeating, food-related OEs are also participatory, immersive and multisensorial. For individuals who enjoy socializing around food preparation, food-related OEs offer a unique opportunity for digital food co-production, thus expanding the scope of online practices related to digital commensality.

### ***Food and cooking classes as tourist activities***

Gastronomy is an inextricable part of tourism experiences. For many tourists, trying local dishes, dining in local restaurants, and visiting local

markets, provide a means through which they can explore, discover and learn about a destination. Because gastronomy is experiential, it satisfies traveler demands for hands-on, interactive experiences (Kivela and Crotts 2006). In recent decades, cooking classes have also emerged as popular activities for international tourists seeking to learn about and participate in a new culture. “Cooking learning tourism” represents a growing and highly marketable phenomenon (Suntikul et al. 2020). Several factors have been discussed as key attractions of successful cooking tourism experiences, such as food diversity, exotic food, novelty, positive interpersonal interactions, a sense of accomplishment, and a fun atmosphere (Luoh, Tsaur, and Lo 2020).

As we began studying OE reviews, we found numerous comments that mirrored these trends observed in physical tourism centering on gastronomy. Many OE participants expressed that the virtual cooking experience made them feel transported to another location, as though they were visiting the country of the food they were preparing. They also mentioned feelings of sociality engendered by learning about, discussing, and preparing food along with other participants located around the world. These initial observations suggested that, even in an entirely digital context, these food-related experiences still managed to create a sense of escape from daily life under Covid-19 restrictions – as well as feelings of sociality and bonding with others. In the next section we present our analysis of these themes in food-related Airbnb OE reviews.

### **Reviews of food-related online experiences**

As soon as OEs were launched on April 9, 2020 we began exploring this new service, in order to gain an understanding of what it entailed (i.e., what kinds of OEs were on offer, how they were being described by both hosts and consumers). We checked Airbnb’s website daily, noticing a steady increase in popularity – both in terms of the number of OEs on offer, as well as an exponential increase in reviews of OEs. After one month of monitoring the platform, on May 10, 2020 we collected a sample of review data to investigate this new service more systematically. We chose to focus on twenty of the 100 most popular OEs (the ones with the highest number of reviews that centered around gastronomy: cooking, baking, mixology or tasting classes). Using a Python script, we automatically downloaded all of the reviews for these 20 most popular food-related OEs ( $N = 3751$ ).

For this initial exploratory stage of our study we restricted our focus to a limited number of reviews, in order to keep the dataset manageable. We randomly sampled 5 reviews for each of the 20 food-related OEs, creating a smaller dataset of 100 consumer reviews. All reviews in our dataset were

written in English, had 5-star ratings<sup>2</sup> and averaged around 50 words. Our analytic procedure consisted of a qualitative thematic exploration of the reviews (Patton 2014). This consisted of several iterative cycles of reading, followed by an inductive process of identifying recurring themes, allowing for variations in themes to emerge from the texts. These recurrent themes were then annotated and coded using the qualitative software package, NVivo12. The eight themes we identified were (in order of frequency): successful food preparation; sociality/commensality; ease of recipe; food-related learning; virtual escape/feeling transported; food-culture connections; intention to make the recipe again, and availability/substitution of ingredients.

While Airbnb user profiles typically include a user's first name, profile picture, and current location, given this minimal amount of information, we exercise caution in making too many definitive claims about user demographics. However, based on the profiles and images of hosts and guests included in our sample, it would appear that OE participants span a wide range of age groups and ethnicities, with a roughly equivalent proportion of male and female participants. Every prospective OE host is vetted by Airbnb before appearing on the site (Pogue 2020). In order to join an Online Experience, participants must have (or sign up for) an Airbnb account and have internet connectivity. Additionally, OEs are not offered for free; their costs range from 4 to 100 USD. Therefore, while these costs are much lower than those associated with physical travel, OE participants must have at least some disposable income. According to Airbnb's statistics, guests who book OEs come from around 50 countries, indicating a cross-cultural audience.

## Discussion

In line with our aim in this essay – which is to explore how these virtual food-related experiences are perceived and conceptualized by OE participants – we discuss a selection of reviews from our sample that illustrate several of the aforementioned themes. We begin with an uncharacteristically lengthy review of an Indian cooking class, which the host teaches from her home in the Himalayan mountains (the title of the OE appears in parenthesis after each example). The OE participant begins their review by stating that this was their first online cooking experience, following this remark about its novelty with an enthusiastic evaluation.

1. Neha had the dubious honor of providing our very first online cooking experience and we had no clue what to expect from a simple Zoom session. Neha well surpassed any expectations. Well surpassed. Neha began by making us envious when she shared the view from the balcony of her

country home in the Himalayan Mountains. If that wasn't enough, we could hear the countryside waking up with birds chirping in the not-so-distant surroundings. Absolutely breathtaking view to begin the cooking experience. Neha was patient throughout the online class and her passion for Indian food is quite clear. She actually taught us how to make bread—within minutes. Incredible and we've tried the recipe a few times since that Saturday morning experience. The food was amazing and we had leftovers for a few days. Neha makes us want to jump a plane today and reconnect with the flavors of India—all because of her rich recipes that are possible for someone who is quarantined due to the pandemic. We were missing just one ingredient and she helped us identify a substitute.

Neha and her recipes are truly lovely and we thank you a hundred times over for sharing your passion, your food, the beauty of your country with us. (*Bring the Flavors of India to Life at Home*)

After evaluating the experience in unequivocally positive terms (“well surpassed any expectations”), the reviewer provides sensory details related to the specific sights (view of the Himalayas) and sounds (birds chirping) from the host's location, to frame the beginning of the Indian cooking class. From there, the reviewer highlights food-related learning outcomes (“She actually taught us how to make bread”) focusing not only on the host's talents for instruction, but also on her expertise and efficiency (“within minutes”). The successful outcome of this instruction is evidenced not only by the reviewer's positive assessment of the food created during the OE (“amazing”) but also by the reviewer's indication of having successfully recreated the bread several times independently since the cooking class took place.

That food production and distribution was disrupted by COVID is reflected in many reviews, which mention the lack of availability of certain ingredients – as well as hosts' on-the-spot adaptations to this reality. This trend can be observed in Example (1), where the reviewer mentions a missing ingredient. In this case, it is unclear whether this was specifically due to COVID, but it does follow a comment that specifically references the pandemic (“recipes that are possible for someone who is quarantined due to the pandemic”), suggesting that this might be the case. Moreover, the OE host's flexible and adaptive response is noted by the reviewer (“We were missing just one ingredient and she helped us identify a substitute.”) – a trend that we observed in all cases where unavailability of ingredients was mentioned. Finally, we also discovered that several of these food-related OEs were associated with future tourism intentions (“Neha makes us want to jump a plane today and reconnect with the flavors of India”),

suggesting that online cooking classes may stimulate interest in future physical travel.

Beyond serving as a means for a virtual escape to a different location – one that is facilitated by local sights, sounds, and flavors – the social appeal of Airbnb food-related OEs also appears to be a vital feature of these experiences. One out of every three reviewers ( $N = 35/100$ ), mentions the emergent sense of food-related fellowship, or commensality, arising from these online experiences. For instance, in Example (2), a review of a Moroccan cooking class, the reviewer positively evaluates the online experience, indicating that they had “a fantastic online lunch together” with 3 friends<sup>3</sup>.

2. Myself and 3 friends had a fantastic online lunch together as we cooked a chicken tajine with Brahim & his family. The best part was seeing traditional ways of cooking - this has already inspired us to take another online cooking course. Thank you Brahim - HIGHLY recommend:) (*Cooking with a Moroccan Family*)

Beyond showing appreciation to the host for facilitating the virtual shared action of preparing and eating a local dish (chicken tagine), the reviewer also refers to the underlying connection between food and culture (“The best part was seeing traditional ways of cooking”), indicating that a virtual cooking class may expand cultural culinary knowledge. The review ends with the author expressing the intention to participate in another such experience with their friends (“this has already inspired us to take another online cooking course”).

Further elaborating on notions of sociality and commensality, such as shared food-related “experiences with friends,” the reviewer in the following example, describes how through these synchronous virtual cooking activities they “felt like we were all in the same kitchen” with the host and other OE participants (“friends”).

3. A great experience to test your skills in the kitchen or just learn something new. Fun & exciting experience with friends that felt like we were all in the same kitchen. Great teacher, chef, and night to bring me back to my favorite times visiting Spain! (*Savor Spain from the Comfort of Home*)

The technology, which makes these online interactions possible, enables some participants to feel almost as though they have transcended physical distance. These reviews speak to having experienced a sense of proximity, in spite of the digitally-mediated format of the shared food preparation. Example (3) also highlights a sense of escape or virtual travel (“bring me

back to my favorite times visiting Spain!”), underscoring the immersive potential of these food-related OEs.

When addressing the social benefits of food-related OEs, other reviewers refer specifically to the connection and sociality they experienced by preparing food in real time along with their fellow OE participants. We were especially struck by how many reviewers (35%) included positive statements regarding the presence of, and interaction with, other participants joining the OE from around the world, for example: “I loved getting to cook with people from all over the world,” “It was lovely working alongside people from across the globe” and “I felt like I was part of an international baking team.” Statements such as these highlight the international and multicultural appeal of food-related OEs, showing that virtual experiences of shared food preparation have the potential for creating connectedness, or a sense of belonging and group membership, among people who are geographically removed from others and perhaps, for some, contributing toward the alleviation of solitude in these times in which physical distancing is required.

A common theme included in food-related OE reviews is represented by references to “virtual travel,” or “feeling transported” to a different place, which occurred in one out of every five reviews. As we noted earlier, cooking classes have become a well-established tourism product and many reviewers draw on this familiar frame of travel and escape to describe their digitally-mediated cooking classes, as can be seen at the beginning of Example (4).

4. This was a lovely virtual escape to Portugal! Joana is very kind and knowledgeable. She made us feel welcome and also gave us insight into Portuguese culture throughout the class. Given the current state of the world, and the fact that certain ingredients are hard to come by in certain places, the recipes in the class are simple, but I liked that because it means I will actually make them again! (*Portuguese Tapas Class*)

Several reviewers mentioned something along these lines, highlighting the feeling of ‘escape’/‘virtual travel’ promoted by the participation in food-related OEs (e.g., “This is a chance to travel with your taste buds even when we are in lockdown.” Or “Even though we weren’t in Italy it felt like we were there with her!”).

Similar to Example (1), Example (4) shows how various food-related themes interact within a single text. For instance, the author of Example (4) notes that the cooking class promotes insights into the local culture where the OE’s host is located (“She [...] gave us insight into Portuguese culture throughout the class”). As noted earlier, this particular reviewer also makes a reference to the shortage of certain ingredients (“Given the

current state of the world, and the fact that certain ingredients are hard to come by in certain places...”), which is representative of the timeframe (late April/early May) of these reviews, when some ingredients were scarce or difficult to find in certain locations. Finally, the reviewer praises the simplicity of the recipe and mentions the intention to remake the dish again in the future. These two themes (“ease of recipe” and “intention to make recipe again”) were also recurrent our dataset, both mentioned in one out of every five reviews.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Launched as a response to travel restrictions and social distancing measures resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, Airbnb’s “Online Experiences” point to the appeal of shared, real-time, digitally-mediated gastronomic experiences. Although focused to a greater extent on food-preparation rather than on mutual eating practices, OEs join Mukbang and Skeating as a new type of food-centered digital practice which has the potential to promote feelings of sociality and commensality – as well as virtual travel.

Indeed, in this innovative context, cooking or baking - performed as a joint action online - is re-conceptualized not only as a fun pastime during quarantine, but also as a process which promotes social connectedness (with the host and/or other participants), in the midst of the current social distancing recommendations. Moreover, the multisensorial activity of cooking, appreciated for its immersive potential, was found to reproduce some aspects associated with ‘physical’ travel, such as for instance, interacting with people living in other parts of the world, as well as exploring and experiencing other cultures and locations, through their food, recipes and flavors.

As the examples above show, in several cases, the themes we identified co-occurred with references to the current global pandemic (“quarantine,” “lockdown”), showing that the feelings of sociability and escape through food-related experiences are especially appealing in the present state of COVID-related restrictions on physical mobility and travel. OEs appear thus to function as a coping mechanism for some in response to COVID: helping to promote a sense of connection with others around the world who not only share an interest in culture learning through gastronomy, but who are also experiencing the same frustrating conditions brought on by the pandemic.

It will be interesting to see if and how these virtual cooking classes and other food-related OEs continue to evolve once the current health crisis has ended. Will virtual cooking classes become a mainstream phenomenon, similar to related forms of digital commensality, such as Mukbang or Skeating? Will participants appreciate the same social and escape appeals

offered by these food-related OEs, or will other aspects appeal to consumers, once circumstances change? Building on the findings of this pilot study, further exploration including participant observation as well as interviews with OE hosts and participants, would enable us to gain additional perspectives on the ways in which OEs respond to people's need to connect, travel, and learn about food and culture. Future research is also needed to determine if this initial success of food-related OEs during the early months of the pandemic will continue to hold in the longer term.

## Notes

1. OE hosts include both prior Airbnb hosts, as well as new hosts, who signed on after OEs were launched.
2. In their guidelines, Airbnb makes explicit that any OE receiving several reviews below 5 stars will be removed from the platform.
3. 10% of reviewers (N= 10) mentioned that they participated in the OE with friends, family members or co-workers. In most of these cases, participants mentioned that OEs were chosen to celebrate a special occasion (e.g., birthday, mother's day, engagement).

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