

# An analysis of the viability of the Buffet restaurants' model using SWOT analysis

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## Abstract:

The topic of the viability of buffet restaurants remains under-researched. This study summarised the history of buffets and provided key insights into buffets by analysing their viability using the SWOT model (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). Additional suggestions for the future development of buffets were also proposed. A survey of 378 respondents about public opinions on buffets, two interviews with restaurant managers, and secondary research were used as the main research methods. The results suggest that buffet restaurants can remain viable in the future by capitalising on their strengths such as “a Good cost-quality ratio (value) for customers”, “Suitable for catering to a group of people” and “Reducing the labour cost for buffet restaurants”; Minimising and avoid their weaknesses such as “Dishes are extensive but not refined”, “Overeating and Food waste phenomenon” and “The dining environment could be too noisy and informal, and lack of “ceremonious feeling”; Catching up opportunities such as “Creating a scenario-based dining experience”, “Specialising buffet restaurants to a small category” and “Exploring the “set menu” mode buffet”; and find solutions to alleviate the effects of threats such as “Evolving public opinion and policies that are unfavourable for buffets” and “Increasingly fierce competition in China’s catering market”. Overall, as the economy recovers and pro-consumption policies are implemented post-COVID-19, the catering market is experiencing a rapid rebound, which could also benefit the buffet restaurant market.

**Keywords:** Buffets, SWOT analysis, restaurant market, viability.

## 1. Introduction

When was the last time you went to a buffet? A buffet is a system of serving meals, either cold or hot, in which diners can directly view the food and immediately select which dishes they wish to consume, and usually also can decide how much food they take. Among the different types of buffets, the all-you-can-eat (AYCE) is the most common and popular one in China, that is diners may consume as much food as they wish with a fixed price charged for entry.

Some researchers said that the earliest history of buffet could be traced back to ancient Rome (Faas, 2005), while some argue that buffet was created by Viking pirate culture. However, Blitz (2017) showed that Swedes formalised the first verifiable neoteric buffet in the 16th century, and then the modern buffet thrived in Las Vegas casinos in 1946. In China, this dining culture was initially introduced in the middle of the 20th century by a few hotels that foreign investors established. It wasn't until the late 1980s when China opened up to international interactions and witnessed the emergence of tourism joint venture hotels, that buffet-style dining gained popularity within the Chinese catering market.

In the 1990s, franchises like Pizza Hut, ORIGUS, and Shangri-La Hotel entered the Chinese buffet scene (Lin, 2021). In 2003, JinQianbao, the first large-scale, all-inclusive buffet chain restaurant from Taiwan, arrived in mainland China (CCFA, 2017). With 8000 sqm per restaurant, hundreds of global cuisines, and a price of 230CNY per person in 2005, JinQianbao became the epitome of a luxurious dining experience in China's golden era of buffets. However, the last JinQianbao restaurant closed in Beijing in 2017, indicating a decline in the buffet market. Meituan Research Institute reports that China's buffet industry turnover was 1.15 billion yuan in 2016, accounting for 12% of the catering market. However, in 2019, buffets only made up 7.1% of Beijing's catering market, dropping to 4.5% in 2020. In addition, In 2018, the annual number of new buffet businesses in China declined for the first time, with an increase of -4.2%. In 2020 and 2021, this negative growth rate is even larger, respectively -32.8% and -35.6%.

Recently, however, the buffet market has shown signs of recovery. According to the data provided by the Meituan Research Institute in the newly published 2022 Buffet Category Development Report, the number of surviving buffet restaurants in China is around 57,000 and saw a

slowing growth. Regarding the transaction volume of buffets, the order volume in 2022 shows negative growth (2022YoY-1.4%), but the total consumption amount still keeps growing (2022YoY-8.5%). Still, the growth rate is significantly lower than that in 2021. (2021YoY-67.8%), which is presumably affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (Madeira, Palrão & Mendes, 2021). Over the years, the buffet market has been fluctuating and has seen frequent declines. Many consumers and industry insiders are pessimistic about the future of buffets. Therefore, now is a crucial time to analyse the viability of buffet restaurants, which is also the main topic of this research.

There are some other reasons for this investigation. One is that the topic of the buffet's viability has been insufficiently researched, whereas many scholars have focused on the food waste phenomenon in buffet restaurants (Dolnicar, Juvan and Grün, 2020; Juvan, Grün and Dolnicar, 2018; Juvan et al., 2021; Chang, 2022; Wu and Teng, 2023) and about the pricing in buffets (Nahata, Ostaszewski and Sahoo, 1999; Just, Siğirci and Wansink, 2014). Thus, one of the aims of this research is to fill in the research gap by analysing the viability of buffet restaurants using SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis framework is a widely used tool for conducting qualitative evaluations of an object's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Despite some criticisms that remain unresolved (Helms and Nixon, 2010), this tool has generated a great deal of interest among researchers, students, and business consultants, and is considered by many scholars to be an effective evaluation method (Benzaghta et al., 2021). Thus, this study has utilized the SWOT analysis model to assess the strengths of buffet restaurants that appeal to and satisfy customers, weaknesses that discourage customers from selecting a buffet restaurant, opportunities that have the potential to stimulate the growth of buffet restaurants and bring in more customers, as well as threats that could externally impede or impact the development of buffet restaurants in the future.

Another reason for selecting this research topic is that the author is a buffet enthusiast who frequents buffet restaurants weekly. Therefore, the author is deeply interested in the growth and development of buffet restaurants and wishes to analyse their viability in the future.

This study aims to analyze the viability of buffets using SWOT analysis and provide suggestions and references for the buffet market and future research. To gather reliable information and evidence for the research, the study first relies on secondary research related to buffet restaurants. In addition, primary research is conducted through interviews with buffet restaurant managers and questionnaires with the public. The study then analyzes and summarizes the corresponding strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, and threats. Finally, conclusions are addressed, and suggestions for future development in buffets are proposed.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Primary research

The primary research is conducted to acquire firsthand data regarding opinions on buffet restaurants from the public or consumers and ideas from industry insiders such as restaurant managers. To achieve this, an anonymous survey was conducted with the public, and two interviews were conducted with two well-known local buffet restaurant managers. The full transcript is available in the additional materials. As the questionnaires are presented to the public and the interviews are towards buffet restaurant managers, they facilitate this study to make a more comprehensive and objective analysis. However, the survey may play a more important role as it is more informative while the interviews are rather short and the managers may be loath to disclose some key information that may harm their business interest.

The semi-opened questionnaire is designed in both English and Chinese and was intended to get insight into public opinion on buffets. It consists of 23 qualitative and quantitative questions about buffet restaurants and includes single-choice, multiple-choice, Likert scale, and ranking/sequencing questions. More detailed, based on secondary research and personal experience, the author initially identified some factors and issues that could influence the viability of buffets, along with potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. A set of questions was then devised to verify whether public opinions align with the previously identified viewpoints and also aimed to uncover unforeseen or contradictory findings by setting options with different opinions and an "others" option that can be filled by respondents' own opinions. For example, the hypothesis "the waste penalty system(fine) in many buffet restaurants towards customers are seldomly implemented because of certain reasons" was made and question 18 "Have you ever been fined by a buffet restaurant for wasting food or exceeding the time?" and question 19 "Many restaurants have a waste penalty system, but it is difficult to implement. What do you think are the reasons?" were designed to test the hypothesis.

The convenience sampling method was employed to distribute the survey both online and in person: As for the online distribution of questionnaires, the author first created an image that contained the title of the survey, a QR code and the link to the questionnaire. Then the images were spread out in various online communities to find respondents. Some online communities are featured in filling out

questionnaires for each other and all group members are researchers and students who are also conducting surveys of their own. They contribute to a large proportion of the total valid samples. As for distribution offline, printed images were distributed in schools, streets, shopping malls and some buffet restaurants to enable people to scan the QR code to participate in the survey. To eliminate hastily and perfunctorily filled-out samples,

The author discarded questionnaires completed within a minute or with obvious logical errors. In total, 378 valid samples were successfully collected and they were evenly distributed based on gender and geographical location around China and covered all age groups from children to elderly people, as shown in the diagrams below. Then data from the survey was analysed to conclude results and visualised into graphs.

## Geographical distribution of respondents

The 378 respondents come from all around China.

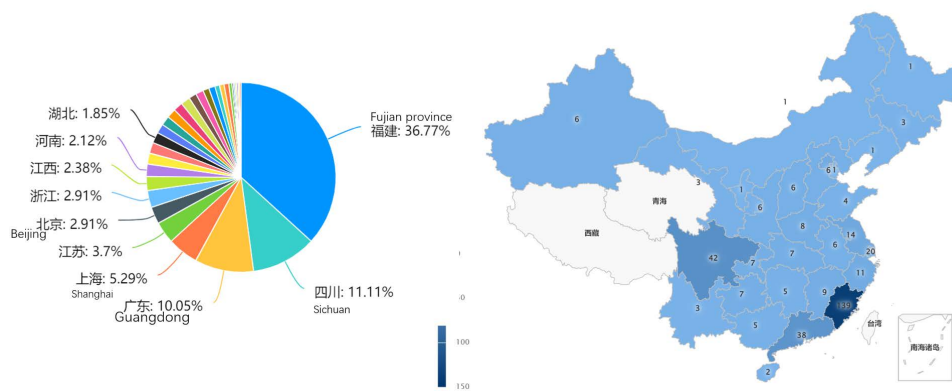


Figure 1 Geographical destitution of respondents

## 2.2 Secondary research

Secondary literature is essential for in-depth research as it helps to understand the background history and current situation of the buffet restaurant market and can potentially reveal some strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of buffets and can help to confirm some ideas that are proposed by this study but cannot be testified by primary research due to various limitations. Therefore, this study conducts a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the background information of buffet restaurants, food waste phenomenon in AYCE, business and cost management in buffet restaurants, SWOT analysis model, etc.

Mendeley, Google Scholar, China National Knowledge Infrastructure, and other academic websites such as Connected Papers, and Sci-hub were primarily used to search for the majority of secondary resources such as dissertations, articles and other authoritative secondary sources related to buffet restaurants. Besides, the author also discovered valuable information about buffets through online sources, such as some public opinions on buffets, discussions between industry insiders, articles and reports from journals and ebooks.

Moreover, the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the Meituan Research Institute, which is the biggest tech-driven food retail company in China and have abundant firsthand data about the catering market, provided

valuable referential data about buffet restaurants such as the number of currently surviving buffets in China and their changes over the years. They greatly facilitate this study and provide reliable and latest quantitative data about the buffet market.

## 2.3 Limitations and difficulties

This study's primary research may be limited by a lack of quantitative data and analysis. During secondary research, a few authoritative pieces of literature are only available for its abstract and the complete materials are behind a paywall, which is one of the main difficulties. Besides, the author found that the number of accessible relevant research related to buffet restaurants' viability is low, while most studies focused on the food waste phenomenon and its relation with obesity in buffet restaurants, but indeed, they are also linked with the weaknesses and threats of buffets.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 Strength of buffet restaurants

The strength of buffet restaurants refers to factors that attract/satisfy customers, benefit restauranters, and indirectly generate social/external benefits for the third party. The review of scientific literature and analysis from the primary research revealed the following key strengths of buffet restaurants.

### 3.1.1 Good cost-quality ratio (value) for customers

Buffet restaurants often give consumers great satisfaction as they can consume as much food as they can and usually think that they get their money's worth. That is because a buffet often offers a variety of dishes and includes some relatively expensive ones such as steaks and salmon sashimi. According to statistics, the average price of buffets in China's first-tier cities is around 106 CNY, while in other cities it's around 72 CNY (Chinabgao, 2016). On the other hand, a single piece of steak in a steakhouse can cost anywhere from 49 to 89 CNY. Therefore, those who

can eat more than two steaks at a buffet will likely save money compared to a steakhouse. In summary, the fixed entry price, unlimited food supply and food variety are the main contributors to the value of buffets. These points were also recognized by (Wang and Lin, 2017) and most of the respondents in our surveys as shown in Fig 2: the good cost-quality ratio is the main reason for choosing a buffet, accounting for 66.93%; The range and variety of dishes are the second most important factor for consumers to consider, with a comprehensive score of 4.73, as shown in Fig.3.

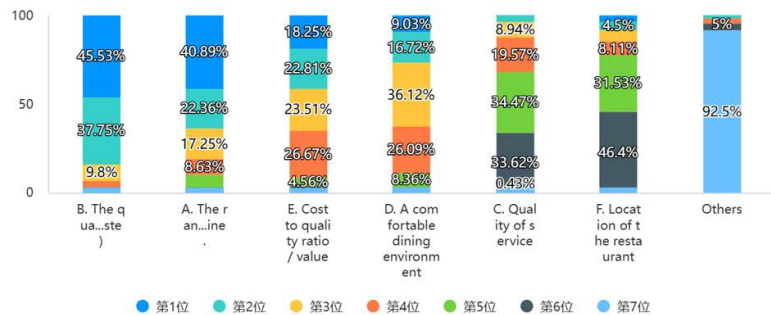
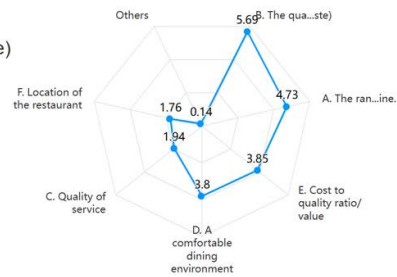
23. What are the reasons for choosing buffets? [多选题]

选项	小计	比例
Good cost quality ratio(value);fixed price;unlimited food;free;satisfactory	253	66.93%
Suits for differences in tastes of a group of people	155	41.01%
Lively; Suitable for parties/celebrations; Don't worry about the quantity and quality of your order	188	49.74%
Experience new ways to eat/try new things	109	28.84%
Habit; Preference; routine;part of my life	35	9.26%
(空)	2	0.53%

**Figure 2: What are the reasons for choosing buffets?**

8. What do you care about most when choosing a buffet? [排序题]

- A. The range and number of the cuisine.
- B. The quality of the cuisine (freshness, appearance and taste)
- D. A comfortable dining environment
- E. Cost to quality ratio/ value
- F. Location of the restaurant
- C. Quality of service
- Others



**Figure 3 What do you care about most when choosing a buffet?**



Moreover, the prime manager of a buffet at Howard Johnson Jimei Lake Plaza also indirectly recognised this strength during an interview with the author: “...We were mainly considering the economic situation of the surrounding areas...after the pandemic, we have decided to position our restaurant as an affordable option for all... now we’ve attracted many families and business diners. The prices are affordable and consumers are delighted...”.

**3.1.2 Suitable for catering to a group of people**

A buffet is a great option for catering to a group of people with different tastes and preferences, as it offers a wide variety of dishes with different flavours and styles. This means that the organizer of a party or event does not have to worry about how to cater to everyone’s tastes and allergies. According to a survey (Fig.2), 41.01% (155)

respondents also agree with this as the second reason for choosing a buffet. Besides, the atmosphere at a buffet is usually livelier and more casual compared to some a la carte restaurants where diners are fixed to their seats. Diners can also avoid awkward moments or conversations while having meals if they choose a buffet, as they can leave the table at any time to fetch food. Another advantage of a buffet is its hygiene. Unlike communal eating in traditional Chinese restaurants, the buffet system is more hygienic as it is a separate dining system that can avoid cross-infection. Thus, buffets are not unusual for events and gatherings such as wedding ceremonies and various parties and are popular for social occasions, which corresponds with the data from the survey: 219 (57.94%) respondents usually have buffets with friends while only 12 (3.17%) go alone. As shown in Fig 4 below.

7. Who do you usually go to buffets with? [多选题]

选项	小计	比例
Friends	219	57.94%
Family or relatives	233	61.64%
Colleagues	41	10.85%
Classmates	60	15.87%
Partner/Lover	70	18.52%
Alone	12	3.17%

**Figure 4 Who do you usually go to buffets with?**

**3.1.3 Reduce the labour cost for buffet restaurants**

A buffet saves many waiters who pass dishes to each table, as customers serve themselves. According to an insider, the buffet restaurant can reduce the number of waiters by three times. Fewer chefs are needed as they can make larger dishes in buffets instead of smaller ones, which is especially prominent in some BBQ buffets and hotpot buffets, where customers even cook by themselves. There are almost no chefs in the restaurant. In addition, a study showed that buffet pricing is usually more profitable (Nahata, Ostaszewski and Sahoo, 1999). The author also thinks that buffets can bring a significant amount of passenger flow to the surrounding area, especially in shopping malls, but further investigation is needed to support this claim.

**3.2 Weaknesses of buffet restaurants**

The weakness of a buffet refers to the internal factors that dissatisfy or prevent customers from choosing a buffet restaurant, and make buffets less competitive with other

types of restaurants. The review of scientific literature and analysis from the primary research revealed the following main weaknesses of buffets.

**3.2.1 Dishes are extensive but not refined**

Food quality, which encompasses taste, food temperature, and appearance, has been identified as the most critical factor affecting customer satisfaction in a buffet (Luong and Hussey, 2022). However, according to the author’s observations, most buffet restaurants prioritise food variety over quality. This is common and reasonable as buffets are generally more cash-flow demanding (Meituan Research Institute, 2022), especially those offering hundreds of dishes per meal and are spacious because the various raw materials and the rent are extremely costly. Thus, buffets usually have to compromise on the quality of raw materials and chefs to break even, which is the main reason for the relatively low food quality. Such sacrifice of exquisite food quality can lead to a chain reaction: Consumers may think buffets are tacky and inferior, discouraging them from revisiting. Besides, customers may end up wasting

food if they find the food they have taken to their table is not tasty, as evidenced in the survey: “I took food which I don’t like (or stale, untasty) by mistake.” is the main reason for our respondents (205, 54.23%) to waste food in

a buffet, as shown in figure 5. Therefore, this weakness is connected to another main weakness of buffets: the food waste phenomenon.

17. What do you think is the biggest reason for the waste in buffets? [多选题]

选项	小计	比例
Greed(unlimited food but one payment! )	162	42.86%
I worry about the food I want to eat being taken away, so I take a lot in advance.	180	47.62%
I took food which I didn't like (or stale, untasty) by mistake.	205	54.23%
Others [详细]	13	3.44%

Figure 5: What do you think is the biggest reason for the waste in buffets?

3.2.2 Overeating and food waste phenomenon

Overeating and Food waste phenomenon is probably the most notorious weakness of buffets and has been studied by many researchers (Cozzio et al., 2021; Dolnicar et al., 2020; Juvan, Grün and Dolnicar, 2018; Juvan et al., 2021; Wu and Teng, 2023; Chang, 2022). Customers in buffets usually want to make their money’s worth and hence overeat, which can result in obesity and other health problems (Levitsky, Halbmaier and Mrdjenovic, 2004; Wansink and Payne, 2008). This overeating behaviour is also partially evidenced by Just and Wansink (2011) who suggested that ‘individuals in a flat-rate buffet may consume the amount that enables them to get their money’s worth rather than consuming until their marginal utility of consumption is 0.’

Wang Y and Lin L (2017) also find that consumers want the feelings of “worth more than its cost” and “happiness”, which drive repeat visits to buffets. When customers want to get their money’s worth, they tend to bite more than they can chew (Juvan, Grün and Dolnicar, 2018) and waste food. ‘Conceptual model of drivers of buffet plate waste’ (Juvan et al., 2021) as shown in Figure 6, also suggests some factors that influence plate waste in buffet. Finally, plate waste in buffets harms the environment and imposes financial burdens on buffet restaurants by increasing food orders and waste disposal fees, and can give customers a sense of guilt and is also against evolving social norms such as environmentalism, which may potentially make buffets unpopular.

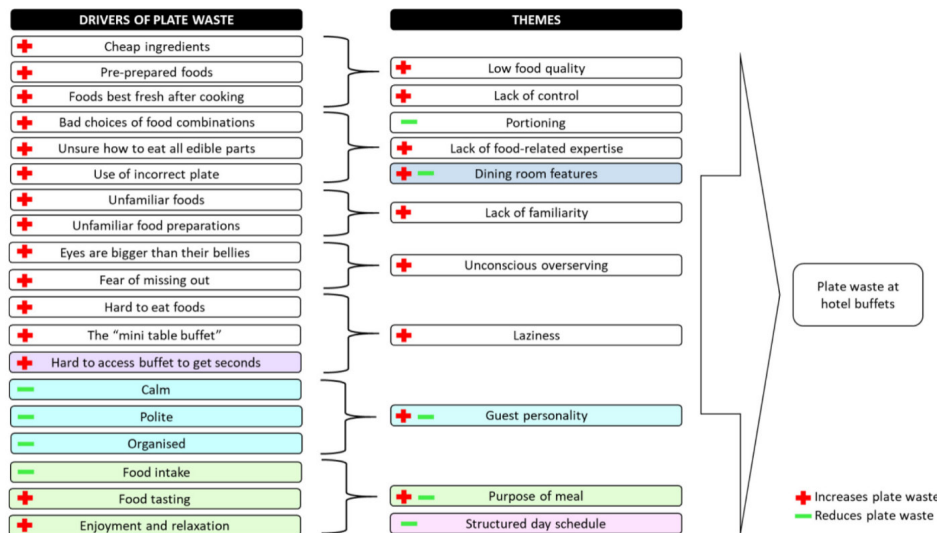


Figure 6 Conceptual model of drivers of buffet plate waste (Juvan et al., 2021, Page 8.)

3.2.3 The dining environment could be too noisy and informal, and lack of “ceremonious feeling”

According to the questionnaire results, most (65.61%) respondents’ choice of buffet restaurants will be significant-

ly influenced by the environment of the buffet restaurants, such as the background music, fragrance, crowding, lighting, etc. As shown in Fig.7. However, the environment in buffet restaurants is often perceived as noisy, informal, or subpar by some customers. Many young people in China now value the “ceremonial feeling” of dining and desire exquisite food and service, so that they can share on social

media, which is not typically found in buffets. Additionally, buffet restaurants may not be suitable for those who want a private and ambient environment for dating or meetings, as customers need to frequently leave their tables to fetch food, and the atmosphere is not conducive to personal conversations.

11. To what extent will the environment of the buffet restaurants (such as background music, fragrance, crowding, lighting, etc.) influence your choice of restaurants? [量表题]

本题平均分: 3.73

选项	小计	比例
No influence at all	11	2.91%
Will take into account	17	4.5%
I'dont mind it	90	23.81%
Important	191	50.53%
Very important	57	15.08%

Figure 7: To what extent will the environment of buffet restaurants influence your choice of restaurants?

### 3.3 Opportunities for buffets

The opportunities of buffet restaurants refer to factors that can potentially promote the sale of buffet restaurants and attract more customers, making buffets more popular. The review of scientific literature and analysis from the primary research revealed the following main opportunities for buffets.

#### 3.3.1 Creating a scenario-based dining experience

The scenario-based dining experience means letting restaurants create or market themselves with some specific consumption scenes to cater for the needs of different types of consumers with a specific reason or occasion for choosing a buffet. The core of creating scenario-based dining is to improve a specific group of customers’ experiences and improve their value perception and customers’ viscosity of a buffet. For example, buffet restaurants can explore business group dining, conference dining, wedding receptions, event catering and other occasions, because as discussed before, one strength of buffets is suitable for catering to a group of people. This point is also supported by Jason Ye, the prime manager of a buffet at Howard Johnson Jimei Lake Plaza, during an interview. His restaurants have deliberately aimed to attract more families and business group diners by lowering the price of the buffet but without compromising the quality of chefs and services. He confirmed that the result so far is excellent for the increased turnovers and seat occupancy

rate of his buffet. Buffets can focus on the theme and occasion and explore some essential dining scenes, such as weddings and other large banquet dining, to provide services in the form of a buffet.

Moreover, buffets can also explore other scenario-based dining occasions such as dating, especially to attract young customers. While it may seem counterintuitive to some, buffets can make for a great spot for dating. Despite some common stereotypes that buffets lack romance, a majority of respondents (45.5%, 172) did not view buffets as inferior, as shown in Fig 8 below. Indeed, Buffets have the potential to be an ideal choice for a first date. Firstly, opting for a buffet can avoid the awkwardness of figuring out what to order and the surprise of a hefty bill. Secondly, partners can learn more about each other during a buffet, such as their food preferences and aversions, by observing which dishes they choose. One can even infer their partner’s traits by watching their behaviour during a buffet meal. For example, people who only consume a small amount of food at first and then don’t add more may be shy or are concerned about giving you a negative impression of gluttony; people who frequently generate plate waste may be morally immature. Lastly, the lively and casual atmosphere of a buffet can ease first-date jitters and encourage conversation and interaction between each other. In general, some buffet establishments can market themselves as an excellent spot for a date, and enhance their dining experience to attract more young customers.

20. Do you think buffets are inferior to la carte restaurants, even when the price per person is similar?

[单选题]

选项	小计	比例
No, buffets are cool\more economical\satisfactory.	172	45.5%
Yes, buffets are not exquisite\noisy\undecent.	57	15.08%
Neutral, it depends on the occasion.	144	38.1%

**Figure 8 Do you think buffets are inferior to la carte restaurants, even if prices are similar?**

### 3.3.2 Specialising buffet restaurants to a small category

Specializing buffets to a specific category, such as pizza, Japanese food, or vegetarian food, has enormous potential and many advantages. There are already many successful templates in China, like ORIGUS, CHARLIOPIG and Yixu Sukiyaki.

Firstly, the running cost of a specialized buffet could be greatly reduced. Compared to a flat rate buffet, a specialized buffet does not need to prepare hundreds of dishes of various cuisines, which can save the cost of hiring a large chef team and the rent of a large operating area.

Secondly, the overall food quality in a specialized buffet could be better as chefs focus on a specified cuisine or a type of food. This can make chefs more skilled and experienced, ultimately resulting in more delicious and exquisite food. This, in turn, can attract more customers as evidenced in the survey, where the importance of “quality of cuisines” was ranked in the first place by 45.53% (158) respondents in “What do you care about most when choosing a buffet?”.

Besides, the China Global Television Network (2019) reported that consumption upgrade is a key driver of the Chinese economy. Young customers now generally desire an exquisite dining experience which can be better satisfied in a specialized buffet. (Just, Siğirci and Wansink, 2014) found that lower buffet prices lead to less taste satisfaction. Thus, restaurants can also raise their prices in line with their improved food quality and gain more profit. One example is Yixu Sukiyaki, a popular high-end Japanese buffet in China with over 289 RMB per customer while the average price of its counterparts in China’s first-tier city is 120 RMB.

Thirdly, it is also easier to chain and make branches nationwide as replicability increases. This can lower the cost of running a buffet by taking advantage of scale economy. The chaining rate of buffets has great potential to improve, since the figure now in China is 15.74% in 2022, ranking 6th in the “formal meal” category, while the figure for hotpot restaurants and exotic cuisine restaurants is 22.34% and 25.62% respectively (Meituan, 2022).

Lastly, most respondents (42.59%, 161) also have an in-

terest in going to a buffet with a specified category, but it is also noticeable that 38.1% (144) respondents may get bored after once.

As recognised by the founder of Bigpizza Buffets, Mr Zhao: “Buffet is a way of serving meals, not necessarily a category that includes hundreds of dishes. One opportunity for the future is to focus on the category, even an explosive single product.” (China Food Newspaper, 2020).

### 3.3.3 Exploring the “set menu” mode buffet

Although buffets are typically known for customers serving themselves and selecting food from a visible counter, set menu buffets offer a different approach while still providing unlimited food and a fixed price per customer. This type of buffet charges a fixed entry fee and allows customers to order from a menu as many times as they desire, without the use of traditional buffet counters. Instead, waiters serve dishes directly to the customer’s table and can keep the privacy of customers. An example of this type of buffet can be found in Japanese restaurants like Yixu Sukiyaki, referred to as “ほうだい” in Japanese. The benefit of a set menu buffet is that it allows for better control of costs and food waste by serving dishes in smaller increments and slowing the food-making and delivery process. Additionally, by eliminating the buffet counters, kitchens can be centralized to reduce administrative costs and improve food quality. Customers can enjoy a more personalized and refined dining experience, as the service is more considerate and the dishes are fresher, having not been displayed on the buffet counter for extended periods.

## 3.4 Threats of buffet restaurants

The threats of buffet restaurants refer to external factors that may hinder or affect the development of buffets in the future and potentially make buffets less competitive and popular. The review of scientific literature and analysis from the primary research revealed the following main threats of buffets.

### 3.4.1 Evolving public opinion and policies that are unfavourable for buffets

Public opinion in China is shifting towards valuing health



and refined lifestyles, which may lead to a decrease in the popularity of buffets. Additionally, there are concerns that buffets may be viewed as promoting greed, gluttony and food waste, which is not environmentally friendly. Certain policies may also indirectly discourage the growth of the buffets. In March 2021, Beijing enacted an anti-food waste law that will fine eating influencers and TV shows that feature food-eating competitions up to RMB100,000 (11,000GBP). Restaurants are urged to offer different portions of the same meal and price them accordingly, and proactively remind patrons not to waste food (Kong, 2022). However, food waste is one of the weaknesses of buffets. Therefore, in the future, there's a potential risk that buffet restaurants may be strictly regulated by new laws about food waste and even be boycotted by some

customers.

Furthermore, the younger generation may exhibit reluctance towards dedicating a couple of hours to a buffet meal. The urban lifestyle has accelerated considerably, as evidenced by the surging popularity of takeaway as a formal meal option among Chinese youths: According to iResearch's data, China's food and beverage take-out market reached a scale of 653.6 billion yuan in 2019, representing a YoY increase of 39.3%; Among China's 900 million Internet users, there is roughly 460 million take-out customers. Based on the findings in the survey, most customers (48.94%, 185) tend to spend approximately 1.5 hours at a buffet during each visit, which may appear time-consuming for some busy individuals. As shown in Fig 9.

15. How long is your average meal duration in a buffet? [单选题]

选项	小计	比例
A. around half an hour.	12	3.17%
B. around an hour.	102	26.98%
C. around 1.5 hours	185	48.94%
D. around or above 2 hours.	73	19.31%

Figure 9: How long is your average meal duration in a buffet?

### 3.4.2 Increasingly fierce competition in China's catering market

The data from the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that the number of new registrations for food-related enterprises in China has reached 2.022 million from January to June 2023. This represents 84% of the total new registrations in 2019, indicating a highly competitive market. Buffets, however, seem to be lagging in popularity, accounting for just 0.7% of online orders in 2020 and ranking 16th in the catering market, slightly higher than Korean and Southeast Asian cuisine. While takeaways make up a significant 20% of the catering market, buffets face the challenge of being unable to offer delivery. Meituan Dianping has noted a decline in the number of user reviews and catering outlets for buffets in 2020. To sum up, the degree of competition in China's catering industry is very intense. New entrants continue to flood the market, shrinking the market share for buffets

## 4. Conclusion

The current trend in dining is towards quality enhancement and diversification. Modern restaurants, including buffets, have evolved into more than mere eating estab-

lishments. They now serve as multi-functional venues that integrate socializing, entertainment, leisure activities, and even commercial activities. As discussed in the introduction, buffets, a relatively young type of formal meal in China that just emerged in the 1990s, are still surviving and keep growing in such a complex and intense competitive catering market.

This study believes that buffet restaurants are viable in the future, as long as they can keep up their strengths such as "a Good cost-quality ratio (value) for customers", "Suitable for catering to a group of people" and "Reduce the labour cost for buffet restaurants"; Minimising and avoid their weaknesses such as "Dishes are extensive but not refined", "Overeating and Food waste phenomenon" and "The dining environment could be too noisy and informal, and lack of "ceremonious feeling"; Catching up opportunities such as "Creating a scenario-based dining experience", "Specialising buffet restaurants to a small category" and "Exploring the "set menu" mode buffet"; and find solutions to combat or alleviate the effects of threats such as "Evolving public opinion and policies that are unfavourable for buffets" and "Increasingly fierce competition in China's catering market". Moreover, the latest data

released by the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that in 2023, national catering market revenue reached 5.289 billion yuan, representing a growth rate of 20.4% YoY. With the systematic recovery of production and daily life as well as the continuous development of pro-consumption policies, the catering industry has experienced a rapid rebound after the COVID-19 pandemic, which may also benefit buffet restaurants.

The following are additional suggestions for buffets to perform better in the future, which are unable to be addressed in this study due to various limitations. These points are also recommended for future research to test their feasibility and effectiveness. (1): Escaping the Red Sea of “budget buffets”, upgrading and setting up premium brands (e.g., JIBULU opened its premium brand XiTing seafood buffets). (2): Setting up buffets in shopping malls as catering is an important part of the shopping centres, and the characteristics of customers in shopping malls’ one-stop entertainment are quite similar to buffet’s unique consumer groups and can enjoy the effect of external economics of scale. (3): Buffets can be promoted by combining with Internet celebrity chefs and influencers, or by marketing a signature dish every month or season, to make it trendier among young people. (4): Catering to environmentalism or sustainable development, and the need for healthy diets, minimising food waste by rewarding customers who did not waste food.

The present study contributes to the literature on buffet restaurants in many ways: (1) by filling the research gap in the qualitative analysis of the viability of buffets using the SWOT model, while most previous research focused on the food waste phenomenon, pricing and overeating behaviours in buffets. (2) by summarising the history of buffets and their background information/literature and the current situation in China. (3) by providing first-hand data from a survey with 378 respondents and 23 questions, and two interviews with well-known buffet managers, which can enable future research to take as references.

This study is limited by lacking of first-hand quantitative data about buffet restaurants. Besides, the primary research has been mainly conducted in Xiamen, China. So, replication studies in other geographical areas and collecting more quantitative data would be of great value.

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