From food to memories: A narrative literature review on experience economy realms in theme restaurants

Nor Amalin Sahiira Mohd Fikeri[1] [amalinhmf@gmail.com]

Farah Adibah Che Ishak[2] [farahadibah@upm.edu.my]

Hazrina Ghazali[3] [hazrina@upm.edu.my]

Siti Fatimah Mohamad[4] [s_fatimah@upm.edu.my]

Abstract | Despite the extensive body of research on the experience economy within the food industry, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding the customer experience, especially in the context of theme restaurants. The theme restaurant industry attracts customers as it offers a truly exceptional dining theme-related experience. Integrating experience economy realms into theme restaurants enhances the overall customer experience, creating a lasting impression in their memory and increasing the likelihood of repeat patronage. However, there is scarcity of studies on the role of the experience economy in theme restaurants, which might give profound implications to business owners and tourism boards. Thus, this study aims to assess essential realms theme restaurants should incorporate. This narrative review provides an extensive understanding by analysing 26 articles from academic search engines. The elements discovered were divided into five distinct categories: (1) education, (2) entertainment, (3) escapism, (4) aesthetics, and (5) sweet spot. Incorporating these domains into a theme restaurant is crucial as it offers delectable food and memorable dining experience for customers. This understanding and utilisation of experience economy concepts may serve as a strategic guide for owners seeking to create extraordinary theme restaurants that align seamlessly with the demands and desires of discerning consumers.

[1] Master of Science in Food Service Management at Department of Food Service and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
[2] Associate Professor at Department of Food Service and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia (Corresponding Author)
[3] Associate Professor at Department of Food Service and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
[4] Senior lecturer at Department of Food Service and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Food-related or culinary mementoes are significant components of the tourist experience (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). According to Jang (2017), the growing popularity of 'culinary tourism' also known as 'food tourism' and 'gastronomy tourism' has allowed many countries to emphasise the gastronomical component of the tourism attractions. The tourism industry defined food tourism as tourist and visitor activities motivated mainly by the desire to eat (Hall, 2006). Food tourism is believed to be a distinctive form that aids in developing travel destinations (Pakhalov & Dosaykina, 2021). Thus, the establishment has led to a wide range of delectable and intriguing cuisine, from upscale restaurants to hawker stalls on the street (Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017). However, in 2019, the tourism industry deteriorated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby many nations enforced stricter travel restrictions, such as obligatory testing and quarantines. The tourism industry regained its popularity post-pandemic when governments granted travel leeway, and consumers look forward to experiencing travelling with food tourism being one of the aspects governing their travel destination (Tourism Malaysia, 2021).

Theme restaurants are considered as one of the culinary businesses visitors desire. Theme restaurants offer patrons a unique dining, entertainment, and theme-related experience (Yan & Felicen, 2021). Many theme restaurants worldwide have garnered devoted patrons who revisit the restaurants to enjoy the ambience and entertainment (Sommerville, 2007). One example of a theme restaurant in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom is The Rainforest Café, with a rainforest motif that includes animatronic animals and jungle noises (Addis & Holbrook, 2019). Another attraction in Orlando, Florida, brings theme eateries for its Universal Studios theme park that mimic the wizarding world of Harry Potter (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018). It is claimed that the theme restaurant has effectively generated memorable consumer experiences and achieved enormous success. The goal of a theme restaurant is to elevate patrons to a new world to provide patrons with a creative atmosphere. These restaurants frequently draw visitors looking forward to enjoying a memorable dining experience beyond food and beverages (Yan & Felicen, 2021).

Restaurants will no longer be successful based on their cuisine as consumers seek different cultures and authentic eating experiences (Jang et al., 2011). Pine and Gilmore (1999) discussed experience realms to determine what makes an experience memorable. The authors identified four categories of customer experiences when referring to the experience economy, which included 4Es: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism (Alyani et al., 2016). Although there are numerous studies on the experience economy (Kastenholz et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Mehrjerdi et al., 2022) and theme restaurants (Anggraeni et al., 2020; Nuratirah et al., 2020; Wan, 2021), most researchers examined these subjects separately, where they do not discuss all four realms of the experience economy. Theoretically, theme restaurants may promote a country's image positively, encourage tourists to visit, pique tourists' curiosity in a particular culture, and offer unique dining experiences that set them apart from other eateries (Jang, 2017; Yan & Felicen, 2021). Therefore, experience economy can aid these restaurants in enticing customers with their ambience and excellent services (Cong & Yang, 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1.   Food Tourism

In the eighteenth century, 'food tourism' was first used to describe the culinary experience of consuming food and wine during excursions (Kunasegaran et al., 2020). Food tourism describes the traveller's interaction with food and related activities. It is significantly more intricate than simply delivering meals to tourists, as experiences are complex (UNWTO, 2019). According to Ellis et al. (2018), food tourism consists of visiting various food producers, festivals, restaurants, and other designated locations, primarily to indulge in food tastings or experience the features of a specialised food production region. It is a distinct subset of tourism that contributes to the growth of tourist locations (Pakhalov & Dosaykina, 2021). This statement was reinforced by Jang (2017), who added that various nations worldwide are using this chance to focus on improving their gastronomy component to attract more visitors. The five themes that dominate the food tourism industry are destination orientation, marketing and management, motivation, culture, and authenticity (Ellis et al., 2018). To strengthen food tourism, entrepreneurs have highlighted the need to deepen their understanding of food heritage through educational initiatives and the implementation of certification schemes that ensure the authenticity of their traditional cuisines (Salvado & Kastenholz, 2024). Food tourism is concerned with the sensory and cultural experiences that

visitors yearn while dining, with such experiences being the spotlight or the supporting action (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Teixeira & Ribeiro, 2013). Additionally, food may be experienced physically by visitors when they participate in broader food-related activities such as visiting food-producing sites, taking culinary lessons, or attending events with a food theme (Ellis et al., 2018).

The most widely used strategy for promoting food tourism involves management and marketing, typically showcased through the lens of food and food tourism by applying principles of marketing, management, and fundamental business concepts (Ellis et al., 2018). The motivation for consumers to choose a restaurant can occasionally be positively impacted by marketing. According to Lee et al. (2014), an essential factor in determining a place is the desire to enjoy the local cuisine or other food-related activities. Numerous studies examined customers' purchase behaviour, satisfaction, and motivation (Guan & Jones, 2015; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Lin & Chen, 2014). Besides that, customers' food choices may be influenced by their ideologies, convenience, price, familiarity, desire for health, concern about weight, sensory pleasure, and other factors (Johanson et al., 2011). Consequently, many forms of food tourism demonstrate the importance of food to people as a travel motivator (Hall & Sharples, 2004).

2.2. Theme Restaurants

A theme restaurant provides a dining space where patrons experience a particular cuisine and a unique ambience (Marinković et al., 2015). The restaurant's design idea, which encompasses the exterior and interior designs and ambience, is the theme (Simpson, 2003). For instance, a regional restaurant might consider providing an authentic dining experience with a physical structure and interior representing that nation or region (Marinković et al., 2015). Moreover, traditional eateries draw clients in by focusing on taste and pricing. On the other hand, the distinctive 'eating culture experience' that theme restaurants offer as a marketing pitch has effectively drawn consumers' attention (Yan & Felicen, 2021). Hence, restaurant branding and marketing strategies must include the theme since it establishes the mood and standards for the patron experience (Simpson, 2003). Additionally, Yan and Felicen (2021) mentioned a wide range of theme restaurants, including ones with ethnic themes, romantic restaurants for lovers, fan restaurants, restaurants with airline themes, jungle themes, sci-fi themes, and many more.

To provide consumers with a positive experience, the theme restaurant uses aesthetics, ambience, lighting, service items, space arrangement, functions, logo symbols, and other elements (Yan & Felicen, 2021). A restaurant with a unique concept distinctively attracts tourists because it offers a pleasant experience (Catibog-Sinha, 2015). Apart from that, restaurants with themed attraction may draw consumers by providing these experiences as consumers are interested in particular themes and are prepared to pay more for the exceptional experiences (Sørensen et al., 2020). Chang (2018) and Pizam (2010) further added that customers are likelier to spend more when dining at a restaurant that combines a distinctive theme into its service. However, the value of the customer experience varies as everyone has unique needs and opinions on their experiences. The success of a theme restaurant depends on its ability to provide consumers with a distinctive experience. Theme restaurant's distinctiveness is aimed at a set of customers who share similar interests, hobbies, and aesthetics instead of the general public (Yan & Felicen, 2021). Additionally, the authors argued that theme restaurants should incorporate interactions between employees and customers and the actual physical décor and menu items. Theme restaurants may increase the value of the tourist experience for consumers by establishing a unified and immersive environment (Sørensen et al., 2020). A restaurant with a unique motif is more likely to attract repeat customers (Cheng et al., 2020).

2.3.   Experience Economy

Businesses that focus on the customer experience discover methods to enhance or simplify the client's life by making them feel special or by creating a narrative about the product for better understanding. Thus, customer experience is tailored to cater to the needs of consumers today, as they prioritise experiences above products and anticipate help from the businesses they visit in navigating contemporary life (Morgan, 2019). Culinary elements, location or ambience, clique, occasion, and touristy features are the five main factors that influence memorable food travel experiences (Stone et al., 2017). Using aspects of the experience economy and the creative classes, food tourism goes beyond simply eating (Ellis et al., 2018). The experience economy will replace the service economy, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) noted, because the experience economy outperforms the service economy in income generation (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

Regarding any travel or tourism-related transactions, According to Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of 'experience economy', travel and tourism-related transactions contend that customers opt for The Four Realms of Experiences, consisting of education, entertainment, esthetical, and escapist (4Es). These elements are considered as efforts to make the experience memorable. The 4Es in quadrant outcomes are based on the intersection of two experience continuums, with customer connection represented by absorption or immersion along the vertical axis and consumer engagement characterised by active or passive behaviour along the horizontal axis. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), active involvement, as opposed to passive participation, occurs when participants actively influence the event or performance that creates the experience. Passive participation happens when participants have no direct control over the event or performance. Participation in an event, performance, or location is referred to as immersion. While absorption is defined as attentional concentration. The perceived experience elements can significantly impact emotional attachment and loyalty through arousal and memorability, such as intention to return, recommendation, and favourable word-of-mouth to a location (Loureiro, 2014).

2.4.   Education

People nowadays seek and yearn for remarkable experiences that could stimulate their intellect and emotions. Thence, education must go beyond the traditional classroom's confines and emphasise delivering immersive, hands-on learning (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The same also applies to the food tourism industry as it allows visitors to discover the region's histories, customs, and gastronomic cultures as part of the education. Moreover, the authors highlighted the importance of informing the visitors about the quality and originality of regional culinary products. Understanding the techniques employed during production, the ingredients utilised, and the cultural importance of particular dishes are all part of it (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Promoting such educational initiatives can not only enhance cultural exchange but also foster sustainability within a country (Tjitunga et al., 2023). Active engagement in educational activities will aid in developing participants' knowledge or skills. It necessitates the learner's entire participation to transmit the same message. The mind must be fully engaged during the educational tasks for the tourists to gain the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Restaurant managers must understand and know the kinds of information or activities that will motivate clients to learn new things and improve their present skills when visiting the

establishment. It may be a combination of entertainment and education, 'edutainment'. Children enjoying skill-based games and climbing rocks and boulders are examples of edutainment (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Edutainment provides opportunities for clients to play and have pleasure (entertainment) while learning new skills (education). For example, a local restaurant can arrange special occasions such as wine tastings and hands-on culinary workshops to provide an educational component (Jeong et al., 2009).

On the other hand, a menu card is also considered an educational element in a theme restaurant. According to Mali et al. (2021), customers may be educated about the ingredients, preparation techniques, and cultural background of different meals by offering rich and interactive information on menu items, such as 3D photos, videos, animations, history and cultural significance of certain dishes. Educating and informing travellers about other cultures, cuisines, and customs could bring about a good potential for food tourism as it underlines the significance of encouraging ethical and environmentally friendly food tourism methods that respect regional traditions, aid local populations, and save the environment (Moscardo et al., 2015).

2.5.   Entertainment

'Entertainment' refers to various emotionally charged, engrossing, and engaging experiences intended to pleasure viewers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Viewers are considered passive clients in the entertainment industry since they are neither instantly affected by the performance nor does it influence them. Contrarily, they are passive audiences. Tsai and Wang (2017) mentioned that entertainment at a particular destination might differ in terms of its food offerings compared to other destinations. According to the authors, there are many ways to have fun when travelling for food, like attending cultural events, cooking contests, and interactive culinary lessons. Another example stated by Jeong et al. (2009) mentioned the waitpersons singing to the patrons as they have supper at the restaurant as part of the entertainment. Live performances, cultural displays, or music may be classified as a component of the culinary tourism experience (Moscardo et al., 2015).

People look for new and different places for more engaging activities when the economy improves. Grin, laughter, or indulgence can be considered as part of their brief satisfaction (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Pine and Gilmore (1999) added that professional presenters often use comedy to keep the audiences engaged and persuade them to listen to their ideas, indirectly

providing information while amusing the public. Since the concept is not only presented but also offers enjoyment, people tend to remember it as a great experience. Rachão et al. (2019) further added that entertainment may increase the experiential value of culinary tourism services by helping visitors to experience unique and exciting encounters. Providing clients with distinctive and novel experiences also serves as entertainment (Chang, 2018). 'Kids' Café' is a well-liked theme restaurant and a family-friendly dining establishment with entertainment components. These cafés often include a range of services and facilities that appeal to parents and kids, such as kid-friendly meals and play spaces (Kyung et al., 2022).

2.6.   Escapism

Escapism requires the participation of an active person because they would want to visit the location and are eager to engage in the activities (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). According to Moscardo et al. (2015), gastronomic tourism may offer a feeling of escaping from daily life by enabling travellers to immerse themselves in various cultures to escape from the pressures of their daily schedules. Yoo et al. (2022) also pointed out that an escapist experience contains a task that aids travellers in raising consciousness and discovering joy and excitement in things, allowing them to escape from reality. Examples of escapism are theme parks, casinos, virtual reality headsets, and other forms of entertainment. At such venues, an individual evolves into an actor with complete control over the performance. One such popular escapism activity is the motion simulator rides based on popular action or science fiction films (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) added other examples of escapism, such as performing in a musical, playing an instrument, or trekking across the Grand Canyon. Such activities indicate that travellers are intrigued to participate in such activities while visiting the location or restaurant. Food tourism experiences allow travellers to unwind, relax, and become immersed in a different culture. Exposure to other foods, traditions, and lifestyles provides an escape space for the traveller from their everyday life (Tsai & Wang, 2017). As such, escapist-theme restaurants aim to take patrons to another era, location, or experience. They frequently include elaborate props, music, outfits, and food, providing patrons with a sense of immersion and escape. For instance, Songket Restaurant in Malaysia offers travellers a unique experience as they perform Zapin, Chinese Fan Dancing, Indian Stick Dance, Joget Lambak, and other dances. It has become a part of the escapist experience since diners are allowed to participate

with the dancers, allowing them to discover and appreciate new things (Songket Restaurant, 2011).

2.7.   Aesthetics

A fundamental component of aesthetic experiences is customer pleasure with a distinctive and decadent physical design. The customer enjoys 'just being in a place' or passively enjoying the product or service (Jeong et al., 2009). The aesthetics draw people in and encourage them to sit down and relax. Hence, business owners should consider improving the ambience by making it more attractive, interesting, or enjoyable. Businesses should create an environment where consumers feel free (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). As demonstrated by Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011), the term aesthetic refers to an absorption in what is viewed. A museum visit or the breathtaking scenery of Niagara Falls can be considered an aesthetic experience where the visitors enjoy the structure's surroundings, architecture, design, and décor. Furthermore, the structure's interior design is essential when acquiring aesthetic impressions (Jeong et al., 2009). Customers may notice the architecture, interior design, artwork, and other features that intrigue them to give them a thrilling first-hand experience when visiting a restaurant.

A higher level of consumer immersion may often be achieved through an aesthetic experience but only through passive involvement (Yoo et al., 2022). According to Ryu and Han (2011), diners are more likely to be pleased with a restaurant when they enjoy a high degree of aesthetics. Besides that, Moscardo et al. (2015) added that gastronomic tourism may provide visitors with sensory and emotional experiences that may pique their aesthetic interests through food presentation, aesthetic attractiveness, and overall mood of the eatery. Food presentation includes the use of colours, textures, and patterns to improve the food's general aesthetic appeal to provide a unique experience (Tsai & Wang, 2017). The authors also highlighted the significance of designing a warm and beautiful dining space since it is part of the aesthetic experience. Consequently, customers' overall pleasure and desire to return to a theme restaurant is greatly influenced by the design features of the restaurant, including the ambience, lighting, and décor (Han & Back, 2018). Similarly, Kim and Lee (2019) added that the ambience of a theme café, like music and colour, can influence customers' emotional reactions and pleasure.

3. Methodology

The present study aims to summarise the key findings from primary research and advance understanding of the experience economy studied. As a result of this interpretative breadth of materials, a narrative literature review approach was used to provide a better understanding of the topic, as it examines the available research on a subject in depth, critically, and objectively (Baker, 2016). The purpose of a narrative review is to determine and summarise past research, reducing redundancies and uncovering new topics of study that have not been explored previously (Demiris et al., 2019; Derish & Annesley, 2011; Ferrari, 2015; Rother, 2007). This study involved three steps to gather the relevant articles. The review began with database searches because it is necessary to analyse proper databases and run searches across various databases to ensure that the most relevant research article is included in the review (Demiris et al., 2019). The databases selected for this review include Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Wiley Online Library, and Taylor & Francis Online (Table 1). Keywords were also identified for the study to create specialised search strings linked to the subject area. These search strings and keywords were applied differently across various databases to obtain relevant data. The databases were searched to narrow the timeframe, specifically between 2013 and 2023, to retrieve open-access documents. A total of 498 articles were retrieved.

Table 1. Results from the first stage

Databases	Search Strings	Total Results
Google Scholar	"Experience economy" AND "theme restaurant" AND "entertainment" OR "escapist" OR "education" OR "esthetic"	85
	"Food tourism" AND "experience economy" AND "theme restaurant" AND "entertainment" OR "escapist" OR "education" OR "esthetic"	16
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience AND economy) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (theme AND restaurant) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (entertainment) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (education) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (escapist) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (esthetic))	1
	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (experience AND economy) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (theme AND restaurant))	6
ScienceDirect	"Experience economy"; "theme restaurant"	15
Emerald Insight	(content-type:article) AND (experience economy AND (theme restaurant) AND (food tourism))	116
Taylor Francis Online	[All: experience economy] AND [All: and theme restaurant] AND [All: and education] AND [All: or entertainment] AND [All: or esthetic] AND [All: or escapist] AND [Article Type: Article]	259
TOTAL		**498**

Source: Own Elaboration

In the second step, the same approach as Demiris et al. (2019) was employed, where abstracts of each article were scanned. All citations were downloaded into the Endnote programme, and the abstracts were analysed using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Ferrari, 2015). Duplicate citations, book reviews, article reviews, and publications by anonymous writers were discovered throughout this screening procedure. At the end of this screening method, 121 citations were obtained. Then, the abstracts of these 121 articles were meticulously read to determine their relevance and connection to the study purpose. To ensure a high-quality review, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were established, as detailed in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Inclusion criteria

Criteria	Reasons for Inclusion
All Countries	To ensure that this study is not restricted to a specific location or country.
Experience economy	To explore the four experience economics realms that should be present at the theme restaurant to give the customers such a memorable dining experience.
Customers' Preferences	To investigate the elements that impact consumers' decision to dine at theme restaurants.
Food Tourism	To determine the contributing components towards this sector.
Years between 2013 and 2023	To receive the latest statistics and information.

Source: Own Elaboration

Table 3. Exclusion criteria

Criteria	Reasons for Exclusion
Languages	Only articles written in English and Malay will be evaluated since English is a universal language utilised in academic writing, and Malay is the author's mother tongue.
Traditional Restaurant	The articles highlighted a different sort of restaurant, a theme restaurant, rather than focusing on all of the available restaurants, such as typical restaurants.
Tourism	Extracting articles exploring other than food tourism concerns such as ecotourism, medical tourism, sports tourism and religious tourism.

Source: Own Elaboration

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis is a frequently used qualitative research approach for deriving meaning from data textual content and analysing patterns. All 26 articles were thoroughly and repeatedly read and analysed to understand the content in-depth and determine relevant patterns and topics. The Atlas.ti software was employed to conduct the content analysis and highlight the various realms discussed in the articles (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During the coding process, applicable codes were identified and analysed to determine suitable themes for the study. This software aided in data analysis and understanding, making the process more efficient and effective. As a result of the investigation, five elements in the experience economy that may be explicitly exploited in theme restaurants were identified: (1) education, (2) entertainment, (3) escapism, (4) aesthetics, and (5) sweet spot.

4. Findings

Based on the investigation, five key elements necessary for offering a memorable dining experience to guests in theme restaurants were determined. The five elements are education, entertainment, escapism, aesthetics, and sweet spot. Table 4 outlines the detailed list of these elements examined in this study.

Table 4. Summarisation of articles

No	Author(s) & Years	Types of restaurants	Education	Entertainment	Escapist	Esthetics	Sweet spot
1	Akyürek (2023)	Theme restaurants		/		/	
2	Anggraeni et al. (2020)	Theme restaurant		/	/	/	
3	Basnyat and Ho (2022)	Theme restaurant	/		/	/	
4	Björk et al. (2023)	Cruise restaurant				/	
5	Chang (2016)	Museum-Park- Avenue restaurant		/		/	

6	Christianto (2013)	Comedy restaurant	/	/	/	/	/
7	De Gouvêa et al. (2020)	Theme restaurant		/	/	/	
8	Jin et al. (2022)	Sports Bar				/	
9	Kim (2013)	Theme restaurant			/	/	
10	Kim and Iwashita (2016)	Japanese restaurant	/		/	/	
11	Lee et al. (2015)	Theme restaurant		/		/	
12	Lee et al. (2015b)	Theme restaurant				/	
13	Ma et al. (2023)	Robotic restaurant	/	/	/	/	/
14	Ma and Hsiao (2020)	Chinese fine dining restaurant				/	
15	Ma et al. (2022)	Chinese restaurant (robotic element)	/	/			
16	Mao (2020)	Garden House restaurant				/	
17	Meng and Choi (2018)	Theme restaurant				/	
18	Park et al. (2022)	Museum restaurant	/		/		
19	Raab et al. (2013)	Casual restaurant				/	
20	Radic et al. (2021)	Cruise restaurant				/	
21	Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2022)	Theme restaurant		/		/	
22	Son and Xu (2013)	Buddhist temple food			/		
23	Sørensen et al. (2020)	Theme restaurant	/	/		/	
24	Szende et al. (2013)	Theme restaurant	/	/	/	/	/
25	Yan and Felicen (2021)	Theme restaurant		/		/	
26	Zhang et al. (2019)	Ethnic restaurant				/	
TOTAL			8	12	10	23	3

Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 1 depicts the frequency of each identified realm in the reviewed articles. The review indicated a consistent pattern of findings among prior literature. Table 1 highlights the existence of the four Es (education, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics) and mentions the sweet spot, which incorporates the synergistic interaction of all four realms. Combining 4Es is critical for providing excellent customer experiences in theme restaurants.
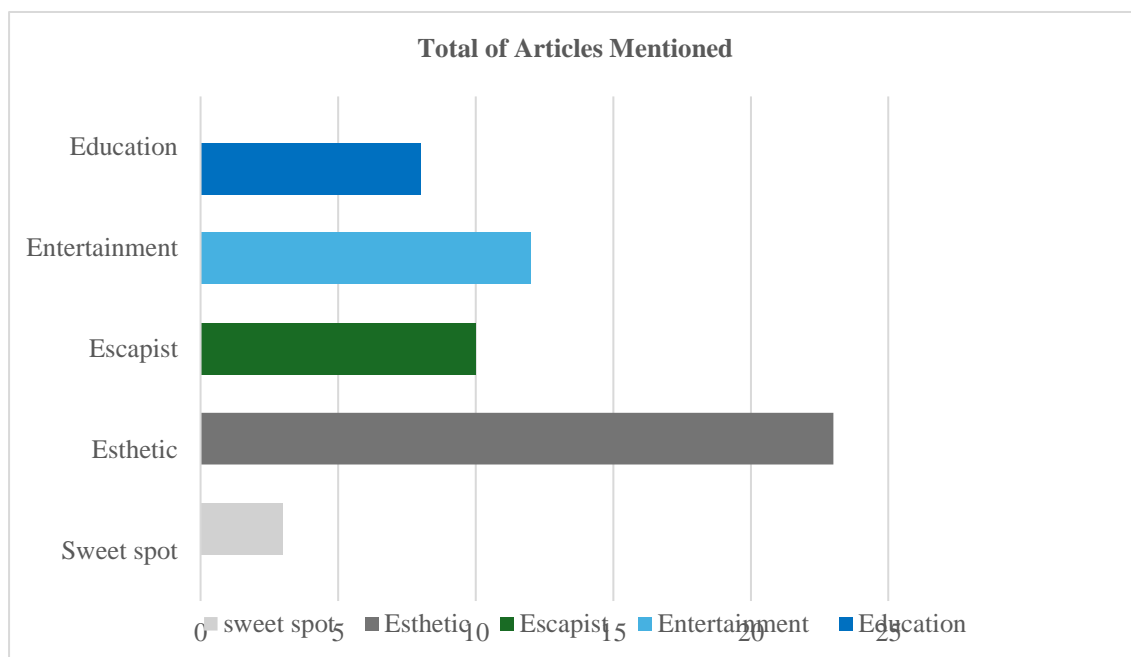

Figure 1. Summarisation of articles

Source: Own Elaboration

4.1.   Theme Restaurants Provide an Interesting Educational Platform

The educational features of dining establishments are represented by integrating educational possibilities in the design and activities of restaurants (Nagash & Shokry, 2020). According to Kim and Iwashita (2016), people are drawn to Udon restaurants because they can witness the chef's culinary performance and observe the complete food preparation process from the beginning to its presentation. Such experience indirectly provides significant insights into the art of cooking apart from teaching them something new. Contrarily, Ma et al. (2022) asserted that engaging with restaurant robots can deliver a more instructive experience than dealing with human employees. Therefore, Ma et al. (2023) focused primarily on robotic restaurants in China and the United States of America (USA). In the USA, the educational element of

automated restaurants centres around food-related experiences. While in China, the emphasis is on technology-related experiences. Although both studies focused on robotic restaurants, the results from each country differed as they offer their own unique educational elements.

On the other hand, education can also occur when people visit restaurants specialising in cuisine linked with specific cultures. These culinary encounters have the potential to send strong signals about cultural heritage and family values (Szende et al., 2013). In theme restaurants, educational elements may be effortlessly combined with entertainment. These restaurants provide a setting where visitors can enjoy themselves with entertainment and a touch of education, encouraging people to think and learn throughout their eating experience (Christianto, 2013). Incorporating historical images, transcribed articles from newspapers, and other vintage materials on the walls of a restaurant may also help tourists learn more. Visitors can acquire new information and insights by interpreting these objects (Kim & Iwashita, 2016). Therefore, education is a fascinating component for theme restaurants since it allows people to learn and adopt new practices. Educational context is related to meaningful experiences, which can be distinguished by their distinct educational components (Park et al., 2022; Son & Xu, 2013).

4.2. Enhance Dining Experience by Providing Lovely Entertainment

Generally, entertainment refers to various activities or experiences designed to provide pleasure, amusement, or a break from routine (Rodriguez et al., 2020). In the food and beverage industry, entertainment can be used to enhance the customers' experience by creating a distinct and appealing environment (Nagash & Shokry, 2020). Customers who visit theme restaurants enjoy themselves when there is entertainment (Son & Xu, 2013). Anggraeni et al. (2020) further reinforced the impact of entertainment, claiming that a link between entertainment and theme restaurant design positively impacts consumers' emotions and enjoyment levels while improving their eating experiences. Studies have also proven that consumers engage and immerse themselves in the environment generated through the provision of entertainment (De Gouvêa et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015).

The entertainment presentation to consumers is ultimately at the owners' discretion, giving them the freedom to select how to incorporate entertainment into their business operations (Szende et al., 2013). According to Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2022), owners of robotic restaurants use robot servers to provide memorable dining experiences. These machines are

utilised to deliver meals to consumers. Each table was equipped with a touch screen with several functions. Customers may use the displays to place food and beverage orders or choose what they wish to watch. Diners could watch the chef preparing their cuisine via the screen, adding fun to their eating experience. Many parents choose to dine at theme restaurants as their children could experience activities with robots or games to keep them delighted (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2022). Such restaurant experience allows the restaurants' growth and development as they cater to the needs of their young customers (Ma et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, entertainment can begin with the restaurant's exterior appearance, including visitor greeting and entry design, collecting orders and billing, games, movies and shows like stand-up comedy, dances or music throughout the meal (Akyürek, 2023; Pizam, 2010; Radic et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2022). Surprisingly, the snacks served during the food preparatory duration may also be part of the entertainment (Ma et al., 2023). The restaurant's general arrangement and the employees' attire also contribute to the appealing ambience. These activities contribute a degree of delight and excitement that a regular restaurant cannot supply, essentially converting such places into customer entertainment centres (Akyürek, 2023). Lastly, employees must know the restaurant's history and culture to deliver entertainment. Such knowledge helps them to communicate and explain to visitors the intended message or notion the business wants to impart. In short, well-informed employees can improve the entire customer experience and contribute to a more meaningful interaction with the restaurant's services (Yan & Felicen, 2021).

4.3.   The Role of Escapism in Theme Restaurants

The element of escapism in restaurants involves the addition of designs and activities to allow guests to psychologically disconnect from their everyday routines and be transported to different locations or period (Wang, 2019). This feature can be accomplished by incorporating immersive surroundings replicating other worlds to allow people to escape the limits of their everyday existence (Rodriguez et al., 2020). According to Christianto (2013), consumers visit restaurants that offer comedy activities for the experience, as the ambience will be full of fun and laughter. Studies have also revealed that people go to theme restaurants to seek something new (Son & Xu, 2013; Kim & Iwashita, 2016; Park et al., 2022), to experience other cuisines, especially unique foods, and to enjoy the setting or culture being portrayed. For example, they may like to immerse themselves in the local culture and acquire insight into the lives of the

locals (Christianto, 2013). According to De Gouvêa et al. (2020), experiences with escapism establish a deep connection with individuals. Contrarily, Anggraeni et al. (2020) added that individuals prefer to shun unfamiliar products because they perceive them to be high-risk. Overall, each study may yield a different outcome due to demographics or study location differences.

Varying outcomes were identified in a study performed by Ma et al. (2023) on theme restaurants located in the USA and China. Robotic restaurants in the United States did not have significant escapist features; however, customers at Haidilao in China reported otherwise. However, it is worth mentioning that the Chinese restaurant faced difficulties engaging and immersing diners in their eating experience. Therefore, escapist components may be successfully mixed with entertainment features such as music, singing, dancing, and other types of entertainment to enhance the experience and make the visit more compelling and entertaining (Szende et al., 2013). Moreover, restaurant staff members could also provide distinctive services that fit the establishment's theme. They may include entertainment in customer interactions to provide a memorable and engaging experience. By offering such experiences, restaurants may build a sense of uniqueness and leave a lasting impression on their guests (Kim, 2013).

4.4. Elevate The Dining Experience with the Addition of Aesthetic Elements

Aesthetic components refer to the visual and sensory aspects of design that contribute to the overall appearance and feel of a place or object (Wang, 2019). Aesthetic components may be employed in the food and beverage industry to create a visually appealing and inviting ambience that improves the consumer experience (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Numerous studies on theme restaurants have focused on the aesthetic aspects, which may be divided into interior and exterior design (Chang, 2016; Lee et al., 2015). Several studies have evaluated the aesthetic attractiveness and mood cultivated by the interior design, which includes elements such as décor, lighting, layout, seating arrangement, tableware, background music, and general environment (Basnyat & Ho, 2022; Björk et al., 2023; Chang, 2016; Christianto, 2013; Ma et al., 2023; Ma & Hsiao, 2020; Raab et al., 2013; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2022). Similarly, the exterior design elements of theme restaurants, such as architectural style, convenient parking, signage, and entry play an important part in attracting and engaging consumers (Kim & Iwashita, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). Therefore, before commencing the

development of a theme restaurant, several elements should be prioritised to guarantee and garner the genuine expectations of customers (Lee et al., 2015b).

Aside from the mentioned elements, owners may also consider providing additional aspects such as a safe environment, maintaining good air quality (Radic et al., 2021), presenting food creatively (Yan & Felicen, 2021), and designing an attractive employee uniform (Meng & Choi, 2018). These aspects cater to the customers' needs, who are prepared to spend more for restaurants that provide a pleasant atmosphere (Szende et al., 2013), as these aesthetic elements could significantly impact their emotions during their dine-ins (Jin et al., 2022). Hence, it is critical to identify the target market and decide on the exact concept for the restaurant before deciding on specific business criteria. For example, some people may enjoy dining in a gloomy lit area at a restaurant since it provides a beautiful and unique ambience, while some people may dislike gloomy rooms because they enjoy having a clear visual of their meals (Son & Xu, 2013). Contrarily, Kim (2013) added that restaurants should prioritise service above a well-decorated setting. In such cases, customers attend theme restaurants for the quality of service rather than the business's aesthetics.

4.5.   The Combination of Four Elements

The 'sweet spot', as conceptualised by Pine and Gilmore, refers to the ideal convergence of four experiential dimensions—entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics—resulting in a rich, multidimensional experience that deeply engages consumers (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). This intersection achieves a dynamic balance between active and passive participation, as well as between absorption and immersion, optimising consumer satisfaction and emotional impact by fulfilling their need for both engagement and emotional connection (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). This balance enables consumers to fully immerse themselves in the experience, resulting in greater enjoyment and satisfaction. When all four experiential dimensions are effectively integrated, the experience can become transformative, allowing consumers to feel entertained and educated while simultaneously deriving aesthetic pleasure and a sense of escapism (Guo et al., 2023; Kolar, 2017; Mahdzar, 2022).

The concept of the 'sweet spot' offers a flexible framework for designing impactful consumer experiences across various industries, such as tourism and event management, with its adaptability to individual preferences enhancing its effectiveness in meeting diverse consumer demands (Akel & Çakır, 2022; Guleria et al., 2024; Hallmann et al., 2021; Panduputri &

Novani, 2021; Radić et al., 2022). At the core of the experience economy, the sweet spot represents the point where the perceived value of the experience aligns with its cost, signifying customers' sense of receiving value for the price paid (Brennan & Koo, 2019). Incorporating the 4Es—entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics—is critical for businesses striving to create memorable experiences that enhance consumer engagement and foster loyalty (Jurowski, 2016). However, despite extensive discussions in the literature, few studies have examined the application of these elements in specific settings, such as theme restaurants, where the 4Es remain underexplored (Christianto, 2013; Ma et al., 2023; Szende et al., 2013).

For more exclusivity, business owners could choose to mix the elements of education and entertainment, known as edutainment, by introducing games or music that not only entertain but also allow visitors to learn something new (Balloffet et al., 2014). When customers indulge in the edutainment activity, they could unintentionally become engrossed in a scenario that contributes to their sense of escapism. This immersion allows diners to escape daily routines (Celikcan et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is critical to integrate aesthetic elements into the business once entertainment, education, and escapism have been integrated. The aesthetics of the building, be it the exterior or interior, can influence the customers' emotions. These visual components add to the theme restaurant's overall mood and ambience, producing a sensory experience that increases customer satisfaction and engagement (Genc & Kozak, 2020; Tantanatewin & Inkarojrit, 2018). Consequently, the combination of entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics in a theme restaurant completes the holistic experience to provide the customers with a memorable experience (Liberato et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

In the food and dining industry, immersion has primarily been investigated by evaluating customer experiences. Hence, the experience economy realms emphasise the necessity of offering the patrons a memorable experience during their visit. This approach is consistent with the goals of theme restaurants, which strive to provide their customers with unique and immersive experiences. Pine and Gilmore's theory can help theme restaurants improve their business by providing a more meaningful experience for their customers and being satisfied with their services. Although many business owners assume that providing outstanding cuisine is enough to deliver a pleasant experience for consumers, it is also crucial to recognise

the other factors that could contribute to achieving this aim. Theme restaurants must focus on various elements to provide an engaging and memorable dining experience.

This study proposed the four realms of the experience economy, which serve as a framework for business owners to manage their business themes, concepts, and identities efficiently. These realms encompass various subcategories, as described earlier. This study also emphasises the importance of finding the 'sweet spot', a harmonic blend of all 4Es that may lead to customer satisfaction and excellent service to leave a lasting impression. Although numerous studies have assessed the experience economy and its application to theme restaurants, there is limited information on assessing all 4Es implemented in these businesses.

The findings from this study highlighted practical implications for restaurant owners and tourism boards. Firstly, before commencing the design of their businesses, restaurant owners should carefully evaluate various elements to ensure they correspond with customer expectations. The elements encompass features such as the building's architectural style, interior design, menu offerings, and attributes of the employees. Effective portrayal of the restaurant's identity in a way that transmits information to consumers can add to a memorable dining experience. Third parties, such as tourism boards, can also help promote theme restaurants to increase their visibility. They can provide an opportunity for theme restaurants to obtain public attention. Tourism boards can help theme restaurants to expand and succeed by including them in tourism plans and dedicating marketing efforts for them. They may assist in bringing awareness to a larger audience of the unique experiences and offers at the theme restaurants by working together with restaurant owners.

5.1.   Limitations And Recommendations For Future Research

The narrative review approach used in this study has limitations, such as the possibility of subjective bias impacted by the researcher's experiences while selecting articles for review. Future research also should employ a multi-stakeholder approach, incorporating insights from restaurant owners, consumers, and tourism boards to provide a comprehensive understanding of the theme restaurant industry's contribution to food tourism. Additionally, focused studies on specific themes, such as cultural or historical motifs, are needed to examine how these thematic elements influence customer satisfaction and operational success within the experience economy framework. Beyond the 4Es, future investigations should consider the role of technological innovations, such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence (AI), in

enhancing the memorability of dining experiences. Moreover, empirical validation of theoretical constructs through field studies and experiments is crucial to quantify the impact of experience economy principles on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business performance, thereby improving the practical relevance of the findings for theme restaurants.

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