



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Hospitality Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhm

Customer experience management strategies in upscale restaurants: Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic

Angelo Bonfanti^{a,*}, Vania Vigolo^a, Georgia Yfantidou^b, Rada Gutuleac^c

^a Department of Business Administration, University of Verona, Via Cantarane 24, 37129 Verona, Italy

^b Department of Physical Education & Sport Science, Democritus University of Thrace, University Campus, 69100 Komotini, Greece

^c Department of Management, University of Turin, Corso Unione Sovietica, 218bis, 10134 Turin, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Upscale restaurant
Memorable dining experience
Luxury restaurant
Business strategy
Customer needs
Covid-19

ABSTRACT

This study addresses customer experience management (CXM) in upscale restaurants. Specifically, it examines restaurateurs' perceptions of customers' changing needs following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, it identifies restaurants' CXM strategies that are being used now and could be retained in the future to provide memorable customer experiences. A qualitative study was conducted via in-depth interviews with managers of Michelin-starred restaurants in 12 countries. Lexical analysis was used to examine customers' needs and reflexive thematic analysis to identify CXM strategies. Before the pandemic, customers sought "immersive" and "amazing" experiences, while after, they craved "reassuring", "sociable", and "unparalleled" gastronomic experiences, as well as an experiential home service delivery. In addition, previous CXM strategies (i.e., customer experiential immersion, engagement, intrigue, and listening) have been superseded by reassurance, conviviality, gastronomic experimentation, and home luxury gastronomic experience delivery. This study provides a model of CXM to support restaurant managers in creating memorable CX.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic—which started in early 2020 and, at the time of writing, is ongoing—has had an enormous impact on firms worldwide, upscale restaurants included. Local, regional, national, and international measures to curb the spread of the virus—such as lockdowns, quarantines, temporary closures, reduced capacity, recurring curfews, travel restrictions, and border shutdowns—have generated high levels of business risk for restaurants worldwide (Gössling et al., 2020). Relatedly, anxiety and fear regarding contagion have limited customers' intentions to eat out (e.g., Chou et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2021), resulting in a crash in demand and loss of revenue (e.g., Song et al., 2021).

Upscale restaurants have been remarkably resilient during reopening periods, aided by adopting two strategic directions. On the one hand, they have (in some cases drastically) changed their business models for customer service, by offering takeout and home delivery services (e.g., Mehroliya et al., 2021), which, prior to the pandemic, had been a prerogative of fast-food restaurants (Herbert et al., 2018). On the other

hand, other strategies sought to enhance customers' intentions to dine out by proactively engaging in responsible behaviors aimed at increasing customers' perceived safety and brand trust (e.g., Hakim et al., 2021). The adoption of safety measures in terms of personal hygiene and social distancing have thus become the "new normal" for all restaurants worldwide to reduce the perceived risk of being infected with the virus.

The disruptive effects of the pandemic forced upscale restaurant managers to find different ways to manage customer experience (CX), which—despite the health emergency—is still the foundation of competitive advantage and a key driver of customer loyalty (e.g., Jeannot et al., 2022; Kostromitina et al., 2021). According to hospitality management literature, upscale restaurant customers expect to receive a dining experience with high-quality, healthy, and delicious meals (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Lee and Hwang, 2011), and a unique style, ambiance, and service that differs from other typologies of restaurants (Khan, 2020). Following the pandemic, customer experience management (CXM) further requires upscale restaurant managers to keep their customers safe, and ensure that they feel safe (Hakim et al., 2021)—albeit

Abbreviations: CX, customer experience; CXM, customer experience management; RTA, reflexive thematic analysis; SOR, stimulus organism response.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: angelo.bonfanti@univr.it (A. Bonfanti), vania.vigolo@univr.it (V. Vigolo), gifantid@phyed.duth.gr (G. Yfantidou), rada.gutuleac@unito.it (R. Gutuleac).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103416>

Received 28 February 2022; Received in revised form 26 November 2022; Accepted 12 December 2022

Available online 15 December 2022

0278-4319/Published by Elsevier Ltd.

that safety levels within these restaurants usually is very high. The need for gastronomic experiences within upscale restaurants that create lasting memories also predominates after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak (e.g., [Batat, 2021](#)). Thus, in academic research and managerial terms, how to enhance CXM within upscale restaurants deserves special attention to orient strategic choices in the post-pandemic period.

The increasing number and fragmentation of CXM studies, whose conceptual boundaries are circumscribed in recent literature reviews provided by [Kandampully et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Hwang and Seo \(2016\)](#) in the hospitality field, can be examined from both customer and organizational perspectives ([Kranzbühler et al., 2018](#)). Existing research has traditionally adopted the customer's viewpoint, both in general (e.g., [Mansoor et al., 2020](#); [San-Martín et al., 2019](#); [Yoon and Lee, 2017](#)) and with specific reference to upscale restaurants (e.g., [Dedeoğlu and Boğan, 2021](#); [Jeannot et al., 2022](#); [Wei et al., 2021](#)). In contrast, few studies have explicitly examined the organizational perspective ([Holmlund et al., 2020](#); [Witell et al., 2020](#); [Klink et al., 2021](#)). To the best of the authors' knowledge, very little attention has been paid from the organizational viewpoint to upscale restaurants ([Batat, 2021](#); [Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2021](#); [Jeannot et al., 2022](#)), and no previous research has been conducted to examine CXM strategies that can better guide upscale restaurants, even after the current health emergency.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by examining upscale restaurant managers' or owners' perceptions of customers' changing needs following the pandemic outbreak. In addition, it identifies the main strategies used by restaurant managers to deliver a memorable CX, and which of these strategies may be retained in the future. In methodological terms, a qualitative exploratory survey was conducted by interviewing managers of Michelin-starred restaurants worldwide as examples of upscale restaurants.

The findings contribute by enriching the theory, by expanding the debate on CXM strategies and proposing a CXM model to better attract customers in the upscale restaurant context, and by providing practical suggestions for restaurant managers to design memorable experiences and thus continue to compete in the future.

In the subsequent sections, we review the earlier research on CXM in restaurants and restaurant experiences following the Covid-19 pandemic, before outlining our research methodology and presenting and discussing the results. We conclude the study by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of the results and their limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Need for memorable experiences in upscale restaurants

Customers dine in restaurants to experience either functional or hedonic value ([Park, 2004](#); [Ryu et al., 2012](#); [Kiatkawsin and Han, 2019](#)). In the first case, dining in restaurants meets a basic need—to eat and drink—at an acceptable price. In the second case, customers consider hunger and convenient food as implicit needs, and wish to satisfy further needs, such as having a pleasant and enjoyable experience (e.g., [Warde and Martens, 2000](#)), sharing something fun or novel with friends and relatives, or experiencing and learning about the cultural heritage, local cuisine, or identity of a destination (e.g., [Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017](#)).

Various types of restaurants meet these needs. Although there is no single, unique classification ([Emenheiser et al., 1998](#)), quick-service restaurants are usually considered the opposite of upscale restaurants. Given that quick-service restaurants usually offer simple décor, they may enhance CX by focusing on the functional value of service delivery ([Ha and Jang, 2013](#)), such as affordability, convenience, speed, and consistency ([Khan, 2020](#)). For example, they provide a faster ordering experience using specific technologies that enable customers with limited time for dining to receive their meal quickly ([Suarez et al., 2019](#)). In contrast, customers dine at upscale (e.g., Michelin-starred)

restaurants for pleasure, emotion, style, quality of life values, a graceful and elegant atmosphere, and elaborate menus ([Khan, 2020](#); [Ha and Jang, 2013](#)). Accordingly, chefs constantly search for quality, hedonic passion, cultural heritage, knowledge, and creativity to provide customers with unique food and service experiences (e.g., [Batat, 2021](#)). Further types of restaurants that meet these customer needs by offering different services and experiences include midscale, business dining, and moderate upscale restaurants ([Muller and Woods, 1994](#)). Specifically, midscale restaurants offer a menu, value, comfort, and table/counter service, business dining has attributes including location, no menu fatigue, price, value, and ease of purchase decision, while moderate upscale restaurants are chosen by customers for their trendiness, ambiance, and flexibility. However, it is upscale restaurants that succeed most in meeting hedonic and experiential values, in providing high-quality service and food, and in stirring customers' curiosity ([Şahin et al., 2021](#)).

To better meet customers' specific needs, upscale restaurants must create not just good but memorable (if not "extraordinary") experiences ([Hwang and Seo, 2016](#)). According to tourism and hospitality management studies, experiences become memorable when they are positively associated and emotionally remembered ([Piqueras-Fiszman and Jaeger, 2015](#)), as well as "recalled after the event has occurred" ([Kim, 2018](#), p. 857). In other words, customers develop cognitive perceptions and emotional responses ([Larsen, 2007](#)) arising from psychological ([Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012](#); [Kim, 2014](#)), cognitive ([Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013](#)), and physical ([Walls et al., 2011](#)) factors.

The extraordinary experiences offered by upscale restaurants—long considered affordable only by the elite—have gradually fallen within the reach of a broader range of customers. The mass media, through culinary programs, chefs, and culinary competitions, have greatly influenced and stimulated customers' desire for such experiences, by increasing their sensibility, intention, and curiosity to visit upscale restaurants ([Gajić, 2015](#)) to enjoy a gastronomic experience that creates lasting memories. In fact, TV and social media culinary programs worldwide have driven major interest in luxury gastronomic restaurants, quality food, and culinary experiences ([Andrieu and Batat, 2019](#)), to the point that some starred restaurants have become a drawcard attracting customers toward a specific destination, thus generating an important economic contribution ([Daries et al., 2021](#)).

2.2. Customer experience management in restaurants

CXM "has become a top priority for marketing managers and researchers" ([Witell et al., 2020](#), p. 420), especially in the hospitality field ([Kandampully et al., 2018](#)), given that it is a key source of competitive advantage (e.g., [Palmer, 2010](#)). Different definitions of CXM have been proposed. [Schmitt \(2003, p. 17\)](#) argued that CXM is a discipline, methodology, and/or process that can be used to "strategically managing a customer's entire experience with a product or company" in a comprehensive manner. [Edelman and Singer \(2015\)](#) declared that CXM requires using a customer journey perspective to address issues affecting the complete experience.

Generally, CXM can be examined from the customer or the organizational perspective ([Kranzbühler et al., 2018](#)). From the customer viewpoint, consumers' perceptions are analyzed in terms of static and dynamic experiences. In the first case, factors beyond firm control are studied, such as environmental (e.g., influence of other customers) or personal (e.g., task definition, involvement, the nature of the search activity, and individual psychographics) factors. In the second case, experience sequences of touchpoints with firms are studied, by examining satisfaction, negative moments, and time perceptions in the customer journey. Static and dynamic experiences are theoretically created through customers' cognition, emotions, or senses (e.g., [Chang and Horng, 2010](#)).

From the organizational viewpoint, [Verhoef et al. \(2009\)](#) outlined that CXM is a strategy for shaping the CX to create value for both the customer and the firm. According to [Kranzbühler et al. \(2018\)](#), CXM

includes the creation and management of static and dynamic experiences. In this regard, their framework proposes identifying ways of designing and managing interactions with customers (e.g., [Patrício et al., 2008](#)) and analyzing how personalized touchpoints such as employees and the physical surroundings and atmosphere—that is, the servicescape—influence CX (e.g., [Bitner, 1992](#)). In particular, this framework suggests investing in employee–customer interactions ([Mathwick et al., 2010](#)), expectations management ([Coelho et al., 2011](#)), a positive service climate ([Bowen and Schneider, 2014](#)), as well as employees' emotional competence ([Delcourt et al., 2016](#)) and training ([Ford and Dickson, 2012](#); [Otnes et al., 2012](#)).

Another framework from the organizational perspective that is widely used in management literature ([Holmlund et al., 2020](#); [Witell et al., 2020](#); [Klink et al., 2021](#)) is that proposed by [Homburg et al. \(2017\)](#), which conceptualizes CXM in terms of cultural mindset toward CX, strategic directions for designing CX, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CX. In firms with a cultural mindset, CX is part of the organizational culture, to understand customers/gather customer data in terms of both attitudes and sensorial and behavioral responses. In terms of strategic directions, the design of CX requires assessing the value proposition and its delivery among touchpoints. Four organizational capabilities are required: touchpoint journey monitoring, touchpoint prioritization, touchpoint adaptation, and touchpoint journey design.

With reference to upscale restaurants, the customer perspective of CXM is gaining increased attention. Previous studies have examined, for example, the motivations for visit intention to an upscale restaurant ([Dedeoğlu and Bogan, 2021](#)), antecedents and consequences of the digitalized gastronomy experience ([Jeannot et al., 2022](#)), and factors influencing customers' dine out intention during the Covid-19 reopening period ([Wei et al., 2021](#)). In contrast, very few studies have been conducted from the organizational perspective ([Kranzbühler et al., 2018](#); [Holmlund et al., 2020](#); [Witell et al., 2020](#); [Klink et al., 2021](#)). With reference to upscale restaurants, scholars have examined the digitalized gastronomy experience ([Jeannot et al., 2022](#)) and response strategies to adapt to the global pandemic ([Batat, 2021](#)). Thus, they have not addressed studies to integrate the organizational perspective of CXM within upscale restaurants.

2.3. Factors of customer experience management within upscale restaurants

Previous research has highlighted that restaurateurs are investing in a number of tangible and intangible factors underlying the dining experience, which can be classified into three categories: food quality, service quality, and quality of the physical environment (e.g., [Ryu et al., 2012](#); [Hoang and Suleri, 2021](#)). Food quality plays a critical role in terms of presentation, daily specials, and variety of the menu, in addition to portion size (e.g., [Harrington et al., 2012](#)). Service quality influences the CX in terms of the neatness and performance of restaurant staff, especially their promptness and helpfulness (e.g., [Alhelalat et al., 2017](#)). The quality of the physical environment includes the restaurant's atmosphere (location, spatial layout, ambiance, esthetics, convenience of parking) and relationships with staff and other customers (e.g., [Ryu and Han, 2011](#); [Heung and Gu, 2012](#)), and ratings and reputation, in the case of upscale restaurants.

To examine how these factors affect customer satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., [Canny, 2014](#)), the Dinescape scale is used to measure customer dining experience in upscale restaurants ([Ryu and Jang, 2008](#)); another measurement scale is used to evaluate memorable dining experiences in fine dining restaurants ([Tsaour and Lo, 2020](#)).

New technologies also play an important role in CXM, by altering the restaurant's offerings. Previous studies have highlighted how this industry has witnessed rapid growth in adoption of (self-service) technologies such as tablet-based menus and robots. In particular, e-tablet menus positively affect CX in terms of information quality, menu

usability, and ordering satisfaction (e.g., [Beldona et al., 2014](#)). Customers dining at quick-service and midscale restaurants are more likely to adopt tablet-based menus than customers dining at upscale restaurants ([Suarez et al., 2019](#)). Some restaurants are progressively including human–robot interactions in their experiential offerings, with robots serving as both waiters and chefs ([Jain et al., 2021](#); [Ma et al., 2021](#)). However, some studies have revealed that tourists perceive a form of dehumanization of the gastronomic experience as a result of restaurant robotization (e.g., [Fusté-Forné, 2021](#)), although investments in human-like attributes (language and voice) have been carried out to improve service encounter evaluation ([Lu et al., 2021](#)).

2.4. Customer experience management within upscale restaurants following the Covid-19 pandemic

The impact of Covid-19 on CXM has been examined in hospitality management literature, especially with reference to hotel and restaurant contexts. Managers seek to understand consumers' responses to threats due to crises ([Campbell et al., 2020](#)). With particular reference to restaurants, following the outbreak of the pandemic, customers' decisions regarding selection, satisfaction, and behavioral intention to dine out are changing (e.g., [Hoang and Suleri, 2021](#); [Jeong et al., 2021](#); [Wei et al., 2021](#); [Yost and Cheng, 2021](#)). During the various lockdowns, the majority of restaurateurs took account of customers' concerns regarding food consumption and arranged a series of new delivery methods to allow service consistency and customer distancing, developing food delivery via online platforms (e.g., [Türkeş et al., 2021](#)), take-away services, and drive-through to meet these new demands and expectations (e.g., [Gunden et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, restaurants adopted scrupulous hygiene and health protection measures (e.g., [Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2020](#)). Although these measures have always been part of CX when dining out (e.g., [Fatimah et al., 2011](#)), especially in upscale restaurants ([Hakim et al., 2021](#)), their importance has increased to the extent that customers now sometimes place this requirement above food quality (e.g., [Hoang and Suleri, 2021](#)). Studies have highlighted the importance of clearly communicating the implementation of the recommended safety measures to inspire consumer confidence when visiting restaurants (e.g., [Kim et al., 2021b](#); [Chi et al., 2022](#)). Thus, multiple management practices and strategies have been implemented to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis. Scholars have referred to several theories to explain changes in consumer behavior or restaurant management following the impact of Covid-19. For example, the cognitive-affective-behavioral theory and the theory of planned behavior were used to examine how to enhance consumption intention in restaurants during Covid-19 pandemic ([Chou et al., 2021](#)). According to the cognitive-affective-behavioral theory, behavior arises from individuals' perceptions of themselves in a specific situation; in this sense, it is not the result of global personality traits, while the theory of planned behavior proposes that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control together shape an individual's behavioral intentions. Protective motivation theory, according to which it is possible to understand human responses to fear through threat appraisal and coping appraisal, was used to investigate several aspects of consumer behavior, including: a) what determined customer hesitation in patronizing restaurants and hotels and whether such hesitation changed during the pandemic ([Chi et al., 2022](#)), b) the influence of cognitive assessment and affective response on customers' behavioral intention in restaurants amid Covid-19 ([Kim et al., 2022](#)), and c) how Covid-19 affected food shopping and food safety behavior ([Soon et al., 2022](#)).

Research into upscale restaurants' response strategies during the pandemic remains scarce. [Batat \(2021\)](#) examined the changes in chefs' practices to adapt to the crisis, revealing that they have implemented philanthropic activities targeting the wellbeing of the community, socially responsible business practices to support those in the food service industry, and initiatives centered on consumers' food wellbeing. [Zapata-Cuervo et al. \(2021\)](#) studied how restaurants have reinvented

themselves by following survival strategies focused on employees and menus. Jeannot et al. (2022) defined consumers' digitalized gastronomy experience within upscale restaurants following of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, they identified the dimensions (i.e., expected set of sensations) and customer journey associated with that experience.

The scarcity of available research on the luxury gastronomy experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, the increasing importance of studying the organizational perspective of CXM in the hospitality field, and, in particular, the uniquely experiential nature of upscale restaurants call for further attention. This study takes into account the elements of SOR theory, which focuses on how situational stimuli can cause a lasting impact on consumer behavior, but implements this theory from a business perspective. In other words, this research considers changes in environmental factors due to the pandemic (stimulus), and assumes that restaurant managers (organism) will react via different strategies to this change (response). Therefore, this study investigates how managers have rethought and readapted their strategies to provide customers with unique and memorable experiences. The findings are intended to guide managers beyond the current emergency situation, without forgetting what they have learned regarding CXM during the pandemic.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Given the study objectives, an exploratory qualitative research method was applied for the primary data collection and analysis. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were selected as the data collection method for their functional contribution in detecting further opinions, thoughts, and experiences regarding a phenomenon of interest not previously covered by the literature (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

The interview guide was developed after an extensive analysis of CXM literature. Though the interviews were conducted after the outbreak of the pandemic, the interview guide also included questions concerning the period prior, to better grasp the challenges regarding CXM that restaurants faced due to the pandemic. Specifically, the topics covered by the study were 1) restaurateurs' perceptions of customers' changing needs following the pandemic, 2) restaurant managers' actions and strategies to create memorable experiences before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, and 3) strategies that could be retained in the future. The guide was reviewed by two professionals in the restaurant industry and two professors in the hospitality management field. Their suggestions were included in the final version. The interview guide was developed originally in English, and then translated into Italian and Russian to facilitate understanding, empathy, and familiarity for the participants. The quality of the translation was guaranteed by the fact that the researchers are fluent in the three languages. The interview guide was then pre-tested with three Michelin-starred restaurants (one based in Italy, one in Russia, and one in the United States) via Zoom or Google Meet. Since only minor adjustments were required to improve the clarity of the questions, these respondents were included in the final sample and their interviews were retained for subsequent analysis.

3.2. Sampling and data collection

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used (e.g., Chiu et al., 2014). The official website of the Michelin Guide served as the main source from which to choose the study sample, given that it is the most renowned guide in the food and beverage sector and reviews restaurants worldwide. In June 2021, a total of 3177 starred restaurants were mentioned in the Michelin Guide. With a theoretical sampling approach, we applied both homogeneity criteria (Michelin-starred restaurants only) and heterogeneity criteria (number of stars and country), and 300 restaurants were purposefully selected to achieve theoretical diversity.

The data collection process included three phases: 1) email invitation

to the 300 selected restaurants, 2) screening of respondents, and 3) interviews. The email contacts of the selected restaurants were identified from their official website. Email invitations (phase 1) led to 42 responses. Among these, 25 restaurant managers declined the interview because of time, health, or organizational constraints or to comply with their corporate privacy policies. Seventeen respondents confirmed their availability to participate in the study. To be included in the interviews, the respondents had to comply with a screening requirement (phase 2)—that they had been working in the same position since the beginning of the pandemic. Overall, 13 respondents complied with this requirement and were therefore eligible for the interviews (phase 3). To increase participation, a snowball sampling technique was also used. Specifically, the authors' personal network of managers working in the hospitality industry encouraged managers working in Michelin-starred restaurants to participate. Four additional respondents complying with the screening requirements agreed to participate. Overall, the study includes 17 in-depth interviews.

When using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2021b, 2021c) question the concept of data saturation usually used in qualitative research to determine sample size (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and instead use the concept of information power to determine an appropriate sample size (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Following Malterud et al. (2016), in this study, the sample has a high information power considering the research aim (very specific), the specificity of the sample (only managers of Michelin-starred restaurants), the use of an established theory to interpret the results (SOR), and the strong quality of dialog (also enhanced by the fluency of the researchers in the different languages used in the interviews). Given these premises, the final sample of 17 respondents was considered appropriate for this study. All participants were asked for their permission to record the interview. No financial incentives were offered for their participation. Table 1 presents the corporate profiles of the participants in this study.

In light of geographical distance and Covid-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted via telephone call or with the support of online communication programs such as Zoom or Google Meet. The interviews, which lasted about 50 min on average, were conducted between June 2021 and January 2022. Although the various waves of the pandemic have occurred at different times around the world, the initial Covid-19 containment measures were implemented globally between February

Table 1
Profile of the respondents.

Restaurant	Michelin stars	Job title	Country
R1	✿	Restaurant manager	UK
R2	✿ ✿ ✿	Restaurant manager	Italy
R3	✿	General manager	Ireland
R4	✿	Restaurant manager	China
R5	✿	Maitre d'	Spain
R6	✿	PR manager	Portugal
R7	✿	Maitre d'	Greece
R8	✿	Resident manager	Switzerland
R9	✿	Maitre d'	Italy
R10	✿	Chief operating officer	France
R11	✿	General manager	Russia
R12	✿	General manager	USA
R13	✿	General manager	Italy
R14	✿	PR manager	Brazil
R15	✿ ✿	General manager	Italy
R16	✿	Head sommelier	Italy
R17	✿	Chief operating officer	USA

and April 2020. Specifically, in the countries where our case restaurants are situated, the main pandemic outbreak occurred between January and March 2020. Therefore, at the time of the interviews, the respondents had at least 13 months of experience working in the Covid-19 context. Interviews were undertaken in the respective languages of the participants, and audio and digitally recorded, followed by an analysis that required manual transcription to create an accurate final dataset. Italian and Russian interviews were translated into English, paying careful attention not to alter the meaning of the original responses (Hogg et al., 2014).

3.3. Data analysis

To examine the data, lexical analysis and RTA were performed. The former was employed to detect customers' changing needs in terms of their experience in a Michelin-starred restaurant following the spread of the pandemic, while the latter was used to identify CXM strategies. For both, the data corpus included all the interviews carried out for the study.

Lexical data analysis involved the following four steps: 1) the data were organized into two files (before and after the outbreak of the pandemic); 2) each file was revised to remove typographical and punctuation errors; 3) the same coding process was used by only including nouns and adjectives lemmatized and inserting words with a frequency not less than three for greater graphic visibility; and 4) the data corpus was examined via text mining by undertaking a correspondence factor analysis via IRaMuTeQ software. Lexical analysis was employed without interpretation or specific coding, using a purely algorithmic method that ensures objectivity and to process data without any preconceptions on the categories to be found.

According to Braun and Clarke (2021a, p. 43), the aim of RTA is "to identify patterns in data, to describe and interpret those patterns, and/or to provide a theoretically informed interpretation of them." RTA was applied with the support of NVivo software by following the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach: 1) reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with the content, which was distinguished into the two periods under consideration; 2) coding of data; 3) generation of initial themes; 4) review of themes; 5) definition and naming of themes; and 6) writing up of themes by combining the analytic narrative and the data extracts, and contextualizing the analysis in relation to existing literature. The researchers adopted a blended approach: after inductively identifying the themes from the data, they adopted the CXM framework proposed by Homburg et al. (2017), which enables the examination of the organizational perspective by including cultural mindsets toward CX, strategic directions for designing CX, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CX (Homburg et al., 2017). It is worth noting that RTA considers the subjectivity of the researchers as an important element of the data analysis, rather than aiming for "consensus between coders." However, after each of the two researchers independently analyzed the raw data, the analysis of the data and their interpretations were discussed among the researchers, as in recent works conducted using RTA (e.g., Winchenbach et al., 2022; Hunter-Jones et al., 2022). Though, overall, a high level of agreement emerged, this process increased the researchers' awareness of their own positions and how these could influence the interpretation of the findings (Hunter-Jones et al., 2022).

3.4. Trustworthiness of the study

Several authors have addressed how to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Pratt et al., (2020, p. 2) described trustworthiness as "the degree to which the reader can assess whether the researchers have been honest in how the research has been carried out and reasonable in the conclusions they make." To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the widely accepted criteria described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adopted: credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. These criteria have been adopted in hospitality research (Fan et al., 2021) and specifically in thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility derives from the congruence between the study findings and the research question; in other words, credibility refers to "the 'fit' between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them" (Nowell, 2017, p. 3). Transferability refers to the generalizability of the research and the possibility of applying the findings to other settings or groups. Dependability and confirmability can be evaluated with an audit, and are associated with assessing the reliability and the absence of bias in the research process and in the findings (Fan et al., 2021). Specifically, dependability means that the analyzes are consistent and could be repeated, while confirmability means that the findings are clearly derived from the data, and requires the researchers to provide details about their decisions concerning the theoretical framework, the methodology, and the analytical process (Koch, 1994; Nowell et al., 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1989) argued that confirmability is established only when the previous criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability are met. According to Cloutier and Ravasi (2021), tables can be used to reassure readers about the trustworthiness of the research process and that the conclusions are based on the data. Table 2 summarizes the way the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were addressed in this study to increase trustworthiness.

4. Findings

4.1. Cultural mindsets toward customer experience: how customers' need for experience changed in upscale restaurants

All the upscale restaurants investigated highlighted that CX is part of their organizational culture and that capturing customer data in terms of attitude, sensorial, and behavioral responses is part of their business practice. However, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, restaurateurs have relied on the detection of sentiment rather than collecting objective data. In particular, they have tried to analyze the market, interpreting their customers' changing needs, to deal with the complex situation underway. Based on the correspondence factor analysis, this section presents the restaurateurs' perceptions of customers' changing needs by distinguishing them into before and after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. In particular, Table 3 shows these needs as a frequency and by the identification number of the respondents. In presenting these needs in the next sub-sections, some exemplary quotations

Table 2
Trustworthiness of the research process.

Criteria of trustworthiness	Methods for addressing the criteria
<i>Credibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer the raw data and the translated version of the data were back-checked data triangulation was conducted against information found on restaurants' website the analyzes were conducted by two other researchers who did not participate in the data collection
<i>Transferability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> details about the study context and the respondents are provided to allow the application of the study findings to other contexts restaurant managers of 12 different countries in different continents were interviewed
<i>Dependability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a log of all activities in data collection and data analysis has been kept an external researcher expert in hospitality research (who did not participate in the data collection or data analysis) conducted an audit, by comparing the research question with the research process and the raw data with the findings. Next, he confronted the authors with questions helpful to clarify how the Authors analyzed and interpreted the data.
<i>Confirmability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explanation about the theoretical model (CXM) and the methodological and analytical choices (RTA)

Table 3
Customers' changing experiential needs in upscale restaurants.

Customers' experiential needs ...	Frequency	Identification number of restaurant
... before the Covid-19 pandemic		
Need for an immersive experience	10	R2, R3, R4, R7, R10, R11, R12, R13, R14, R17
Need for an amazing experience	7	R1, R5, R6, R8, R9, R15, R16
... after the outbreak of the pandemic		
Need for a reassuring experience	11	R1, R2, R3, R4, R7, R8, R10, R11, R12, R13, R17
Need for a sociable experience	10	R2, R4, R8, R9, R11, R12, R14, R15, R16, R17
Need for an unparalleled gastronomic experience	12	R1, R2, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, R12, R13, R14, R17
Need for an experiential home service delivery	6	R5, R9, R11, R14, R15, R16

are provided as empirical evidence to support the research findings.

4.1.1. Experiential needs before the pandemic

The upscale restaurateurs interviewed noted different customer experience needs when dining at their restaurants before the pandemic. The analysis enabled the identification of two major experiential needs: 1) the need for an immersive experience and 2) the need for an amazing experience. Immersive experiences can be described as those in which customers become physically and virtually part of the experience. More precisely, "immersion" in upscale restaurants includes customers' need to discover the gastronomy of haute cuisine with exclusive gourmet dishes. Customers appreciate dining in upscale restaurants that offer experimental and evolving menus presented in evocative tones with long and metaphorical names. In addition, customers want to spend their time in an elegant and comfortable setting, with finely dressed tables, spaced well apart, to enjoy a relaxed, pleasant, and hospitable—not snobby—atmosphere, and to interact with chefs, maître d'oeuvres, and waiters in a friendly and authentic way. As one of the chefs/restaurateurs interviewed argued,

"Customers choose one luxury restaurant rather than another based on the opportunity to feel part of a unique world, and to bring home a positive memory of their experience at the restaurant when they, essentially, feel good." (R10)

Amazing experiences can be described as pleasant and surprising occasions, engendered by restaurant staff taking their needs to heart, remembering their preferences, and anticipating their changing needs. In this sense, regional specialties are highly sought by customers, who require menus with ingredients that represent national and international excellence (e.g., Alba white truffles or Afghan saffron). As explained by one of the interviewees:

"In recent years there has been a return to territoriality, dictated by the awareness of surprising starting from simplicity, using local, fresh, and quality products. We respect the canons of local products, giving increasing importance to nature and seasonality. We strive to originate a wow effect with simplicity to make our customers feel unique." (R8)

Customers are further satisfied when they can enjoy unexpected experiences through the creative flair of master chefs who are motivated to go far beyond the simple cuisine and traditional composition of the dish, strongly encouraged by customers with a new sensory education who are increasingly looking for a surprising, unusual, and dynamic experience.

4.1.2. Experiential needs after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic

According to the respondents, following the outbreak of the pandemic, there has been an increase in perceived risk related to eating at a restaurant and a notable change in the usual clientele (e.g., an increase in younger customers), with a consequent change in customer

needs. First, a need for reassuring and sociable experiences has emerged. In terms of reassurance, customers opt for upscale restaurants because they associate their fame and reputation with trust and, thus, safe conditions. Although customers consider it obvious that upscale restaurants respect the protective measures imposed by the law, they desire to both see and feel a strengthening of safety practices at these restaurants. In this sense, managers have had to focus on the physical environment as a key element in improving the overall CX. The new pandemic-related rules have required restaurateurs to further increase their spacing by decreasing the number of seats, as this manager stated:

"What do customers look for in my restaurant? Safety. Before the pandemic we had 20 seats in a large area with tables spaced at 1.5 m, now it's over 2 m." (R2)

In addition, customers are seeking sociable experiences. The pandemic has severely limited people's relational spheres. Customers are looking for social wellbeing and to enjoy every moment by treating themselves to pleasant memories, such as dining in restaurants. As one restaurateur said:

"Because of the deprivation of freedom, some customers have cultivated the desire to indulge in luxuries that they did not appreciate before, such as giving themselves a gourmet dinner, considered before the pandemic as unaffordable and something that would only happen infrequently. In other words, it's been normalized by the circumstances of the period." (R4)

Second, customers now demand greater innovation by chefs and restaurateurs, as highlighted by the need for an "unparalleled gastronomic experience." Even during the total closure of restaurants, some customers sought to delight themselves with unique haute cuisine dishes prepared by starred chefs. These customers did not desire the dishes they had previously tasted at starred restaurants, but those that were different from their home cuisine, allowing them to spend an evening that varied from their usual routine.

Furthermore, since the first lockdown, many customers have started—and have continued during the incessant opening and closing of restaurants—to request home delivery, inviting restaurateurs to (re-)organize this service, as almost all respondents noted. Some highlighted that customers were no longer content with the simple service of delivery, but wanted an experiential home service delivery:

"Although we never used to do much home delivery, requests for this service have increased over time, and therefore, we organized to satisfy these customers while providing an experience that is as unique as possible. We wanted to bring uniqueness to the delivery, so we organized a menu kit through video recipes—a way to make our customers feel our unique offer." (R16)

4.2. Strategic directions for designing customer experiences developed in upscale restaurants

The second objective of this study was to detect the strategies developed by restaurant managers to provide their customers with a memorable experience. Following the pandemic outbreak, restaurateurs had to rethink their value proposition and its delivery among touchpoints by elaborating new strategic directions for designing CX.

Based on content analysis of the interviews, this section presents the strategies identified, distinguishing them into before and after the outbreak of Covid-19 periods. Table 4 presents the frequencies and the identification number of the respondent for each strategy.

4.2.1. Strategies for designing customer experience before the pandemic

To meet customer needs for an immersive experience, restaurant managers have adopted the two following strategies: 1) customer experiential immersion and 2) customer engagement. In terms of customer experiential immersion, managers have designed culinary

Table 4
Strategies for designing customer experience before and after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Strategies for designing customer experience	Frequency	Identification number of restaurant
... before the Covid-19 pandemic		
customer experiential immersion	9	R1, R2, R3, R4, R7, R8, R10, R14, R15
customer engagement	9	R1, R3, R5, R8, R10, R11, R12, R14, R16
customer intrigue	7	R1, R6, R9, R11, R12, R13, R17
customer listening	9	R2, R4, R5, R6, R7, R9, R13, R15, R16, R17
... after the outbreak of the pandemic		
customer reassurance	17	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R17
conviviality	11	R2, R4, R7, R8, R9, R11, R12, R14, R15, R16, R17
gastronomic experimentation	11	R1, R2, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, R12, R13, R14, R17
home luxury gastronomic experience delivery	6	R5, R9, R11, R14, R15, R16

paths with strong emotional and sensory interactions and driven their customers' exploration and learning along these experiential journeys to discover luxury gastronomy. Experiences are created through multiple choices; in most cases, a tasting path is proposed to allow customers to really engage with the restaurant's philosophy. One of the restaurateurs commented:

"The dishes are an expression of culture and freedom, a combination of travel and contamination, surprising and unique flavors to immerse the customer in a food and wine journey, rather than nutritious." (R2)

The chefs, in particular, praise territoriality as an expression of concreteness for what is created, the quality of the raw materials and flavors, as well as their seasonality. Based on these principles, starred restaurants invent dishes that respect their surrounding environment, creating an indissoluble bond between environment–dish–customer.

In terms of customer engagement strategies, restaurant managers have created strong relationships with their customers and a simple and authentic approach without detachment and formality, as one restaurateur reported:

"Our customers are our second family and they were the first supporters of our reopening. They called us to reassure themselves about our safety measures and opening operations. They were very supportive of our restart in terms of income and especially enthusiasm." (R10)

The experiential journey has always been accompanied by a strong emotional interactions between the guest and the dining room staff, and between the dining room staff and the cuisine. The interviewees revealed the importance of welcoming customers in a professional manner, without being inclined to stick to "formulas," and of creating a comfortable environment in which customers feel part of a unique world that makes them remember the entire dinner, not just one detail.

To meet customers' need for an amazing experience, restaurant managers have implemented the two following strategies: 1) customer intrigue and 2) customer listening. In terms of the customer intrigue strategy, it is important that customers approach a luxury cuisine driven by strong curiosity, and that they create expectations and immerse themselves in a unique and personalized journey. Therefore, restaurant managers have encouraged customers toward a certain dish, a unique environment, an unexpected welcome, or a cuisine philosophy. An example of this is one of the first vegetarian restaurants in Europe to receive a Michelin award. As reported by the maître d':

"Vegetarian dining is a culinary experience that focuses on plant elements to create a complete experience. The guest who faces this new vision of

cooking must embrace the chef's philosophy of life, and it is precisely this experience that he/she lives, not feeling the lack of any omnivorous element that emerges." (R9)

In terms of the customer listening strategy, restaurant managers have mobilized their efforts to detect and anticipate their customers' needs to make their experience special, by offering them unexpected and surprising services. Most of the restaurateurs preferred a familiar, home-like environment in which every customer feels comfortable and welcome. Managers devote time and effort to organizing activities than can improve their employees' ability to understand customers. For example, in some restaurants, managers organize daily training for employees on the use of body language and expressiveness, and on tone of voice as a manifestation of conviviality. In one restaurant, a "Hospitality Director" position had been established to create an ad hoc experience based on guests' wellbeing, drawing on in-depth knowledge and research:

"If the customer loves animals, we will prepare a snack for them to take home; if the customer has children, we will prepare a dessert for them to take home." (R17)

4.2.2. Strategies for designing customer experience after the outbreak of the pandemic

To meet customers' needs for a reassuring and sociable experience, restaurant managers are implementing the two following strategies: 1) customer reassurance and 2) conviviality. In terms of customer reassurance, all the interviewees had adopted the measures recommended by law in terms of cleaning and sanitation procedures, safety in communal spaces, respiratory hygiene measures, green passes, and personal protective equipment. Although a safe distance between tables was important even before the pandemic, the new ministerial rules have required restaurateurs to further increase this spacing by decreasing the number of seats. In addition, since the outbreak of the pandemic, managers have introduced extraordinary safety measures to protect customers and employees, and increase customer confidence. For example, employees have been requested to follow strict hygiene rules such as the use of masks, frequent sanitization, distancing from customers, use of Plexiglas, and contactless payments. Moreover, to create a safe ordering experience, most restaurants have introduced the use of digital menus (e.g., e-tablet or personal smartphones) available directly by activating the Quick Response code. Some restaurateurs, preferring the romantic and sensorial experience of holding a large menu, have kept this, but followed by a careful disinfection procedure after each use:

"For each customer we have a personalized menu, made with selected paper and with insertion of artistic works signed and dedicated by the chef that the customer can take home as a souvenir of the experience; it represents the best form of business card." (R15)

One restaurant has chosen to contact customers prior to their arrival at the restaurant to create a tailor-made experience in the pre-service:

"Our first contact with the customer does not happen at the table, but much earlier. We have a booking platform that allows us to contact about 90 % of customers before the service for various requests such as allergies, green passes, and other indications. With the pandemic, we have had the opportunity to consider these aspects much more." (R13)

In terms of conviviality strategy, restaurant managers are interacting and spending their time with customers who are seeking human contact. Some aspects considered secondary until the outbreak of the pandemic have become crucial in CXM. The use of masks, for example, has made connection with customers difficult, as this restaurateur reported:

"Using a mask limits the body language of the staff in the room, who now cannot give an extra smile or shake the hand of a guest. It was quite a challenge for us to connect and communicate with clients and be able to transmit emotions just with the help of our look." (R5)

Some restaurants are offering moments of leisure and entertainment. One restaurant manager introduced evenings with live music, an atypical, unexpected, and differentiating choice for a starred restaurant, enabling restaurateurs to increase their profits, which had been greatly diminished (or in some cases, lost altogether) due to the pandemic:

“The need of customers to spend more time out results in higher expenses. We have noticed this trend because we have increased our sales of the initial aperitif, from 50 % to 80 %, and liqueurs and digestives at the end of dinner. Customers want to spend more time in freedom.” (R12)

To meet customers' need for an unparalleled gastronomic experience and for an experiential home service delivery, restaurant managers are undertaking the two following strategies: 1) gastronomic experimentation and 2) home luxury gastronomic experience delivery. In terms of gastronomic experimentation strategy, they are changing their luxury gastronomy menu in various ways. Some are reducing their food and wine offering from an à la carte menu to a tasting menu, while others are experimenting with new tasting paths. These strategies meet customers' need for a guided and participatory experience; for example, many guests prefer a glass matched to each dish rather than a single bottle of wine. Surprise effects of product innovation and continuous experimentation have been found in each of the restaurants investigated.

In terms of home luxury gastronomic experience delivery strategy, restaurant managers are not only satisfying their customers by introducing/improving their home service delivery, but are also delighting them by providing recipes designed by the chef for take-away gastronomy and accompanying them in the making of the dish through video recipes. These strategic decisions were useful to test in advance dishes subsequently introduced in menus at the time of the reopening, as a restaurateur said:

“In the first lockdown, we proposed simple gourmet dishes to assemble at home. We prototyped some dishes through the delivery service to test customer appreciation. The dishes, designed by the chef and perfected through delivery, then entered the menu.” (R16)

4.2.3. Restaurateurs' capabilities for continually renewing customer experiences

The chefs/restaurateurs interviewed noted the importance of developing different capabilities for continually renewing CX before and after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Before the pandemic, the employee–customer relationship was fundamental to monitor the touchpoint journey, by developing the capability of coordinating the performance of specific touchpoints according to the firm's touchpoint journey orientation. For example, the first minutes spent with guests, to welcome them and accompany them to the table, were essential for the success of the entire gastronomic experience. As this restaurateur argued:

“Customers want to find in my restaurant a pleasant and genuine—not cold—atmosphere. To this purpose, chefs, maître d'oeuvres, and waiters are invited to interact with customers; without that, they feel uncomfortable rather than treated in a friendly way.” (R11)

In addition, talented chefs/restaurateurs used their skills to guide customers discovering luxury gastronomy with exclusive gourmet dishes. They aimed to prioritize any touchpoints within their restaurants to create a wonderful, emotional, and sensory journey, where ancient traditions are renewed in unique culinary creations. In this regard, they (re)allocated their creative, technical, human, and monetary resources for a given planning period.

In terms of touchpoint adaptation, upscale restaurants not only meet their customers' requirements, by taking their needs to heart, remembering their preferences, and anticipating their changing needs, but also try to go beyond their expectations, by personalizing their experience. For example, some organize cooking demonstrations or “limited

edition” menus only for one evening, dedicated to a certain theme (e.g., vegetarian cuisine). Customers are further satisfied when they can post their culinary creations on social media, especially Instagram or Facebook.

In brief, both chefs and restaurateurs have paid significant attention to touchpoint journey design, by enhancing products, services, and experiences, along with relationships and communication activities, to take into account—in some cases, exceed—customers' needs and expectations.

After the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the same organizational capabilities are required for chefs and restaurateurs, but they were oriented differently, given that customers' needs had changed. In terms of touchpoint journey monitoring, restaurateurs have monitored the ongoing change at the socio-economic level, by seizing the opportunity to (re-)organize their home delivery service to respond to the new requirements that started from the first lockdown and continued during the continuous opening and closing of restaurants.

From the touchpoint prioritization and adaptation viewpoint, upscale restaurants have developed capabilities connected to, respectively, putting first and responding in more and more flexible ways to customers' requirements. In this regard, they have invested in respecting hygiene and protection measures imposed by the law to enable their customers to perceive visually and sensorily a strengthening of safety practices at the restaurants themselves. As this chef/restaurateur stated:

“Customers assume that paying a high price at Michelin-starred restaurants ensures greater benefits not only in terms of the use of refined raw materials, but also of better cleaning of spaces and meticulous attention to compliance with safety measures. The climate of hesitancy, however, led some customers to ask to dine outdoors, although all the safety measures were applied within the restaurant.” (R16)

Finally, upscale restaurants have designed touchpoint journeys in terms of customer reassurance that, while not required in the same form as was necessary during the height of the pandemic, must still make customers feel safe, as this restaurateur commented:

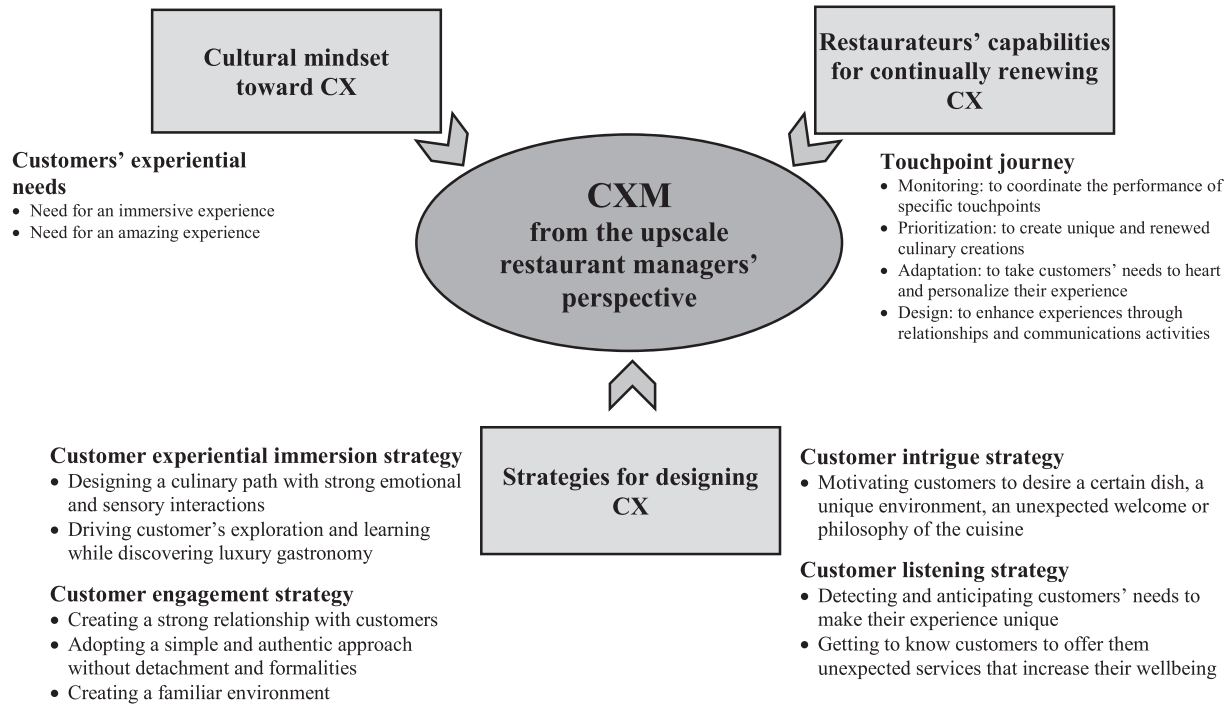
“There is, and there will be, an increasing need for simplicity and concreteness, human contact, and healthiness in wide spaces. It will therefore be important to continue to convey the image of being in a reassuring and authentic place. A safe experience is part of the immersive experience and, thus, it has to be included in terms of customer journey design in our restaurant.” (R7)

4.3. A customer experience management model for winning over customers in upscale restaurants

The cultural mindset toward CX, examined in this study in terms of experiential needs, strategies for designing CX, and restaurateurs' capabilities for continually renewing CX, can be organized within a CXM model to “win over” customers in upscale restaurants. Fig. 1 summarizes these elements before and after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Although these strategies are distinguished within the figure, they should be undertaken by combining them according to the needs that must be met. Prior to the pandemic, restaurant managers provided experiential immersion and engagement strategies to satisfy their customers' need for an immersive experience, while customer intrigue and listening strategies were aimed at meeting customers' need for an amazing experience. To this end, organizational capabilities of coordinating, renewing, personalizing, interacting, and communicating were fundamental. After the pandemic outbreak, restaurant managers implemented strategies to reassure their customers and increase conviviality to satisfy their need for a reassuring and sociable experience. The gastronomic experimentation and home luxury gastronomic experience delivery strategies are ongoing, to meet customers' needs for an unparalleled gastronomic experience and for an experiential home service delivery. Consequently, restaurateurs have implemented

Before the pandemic



After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic

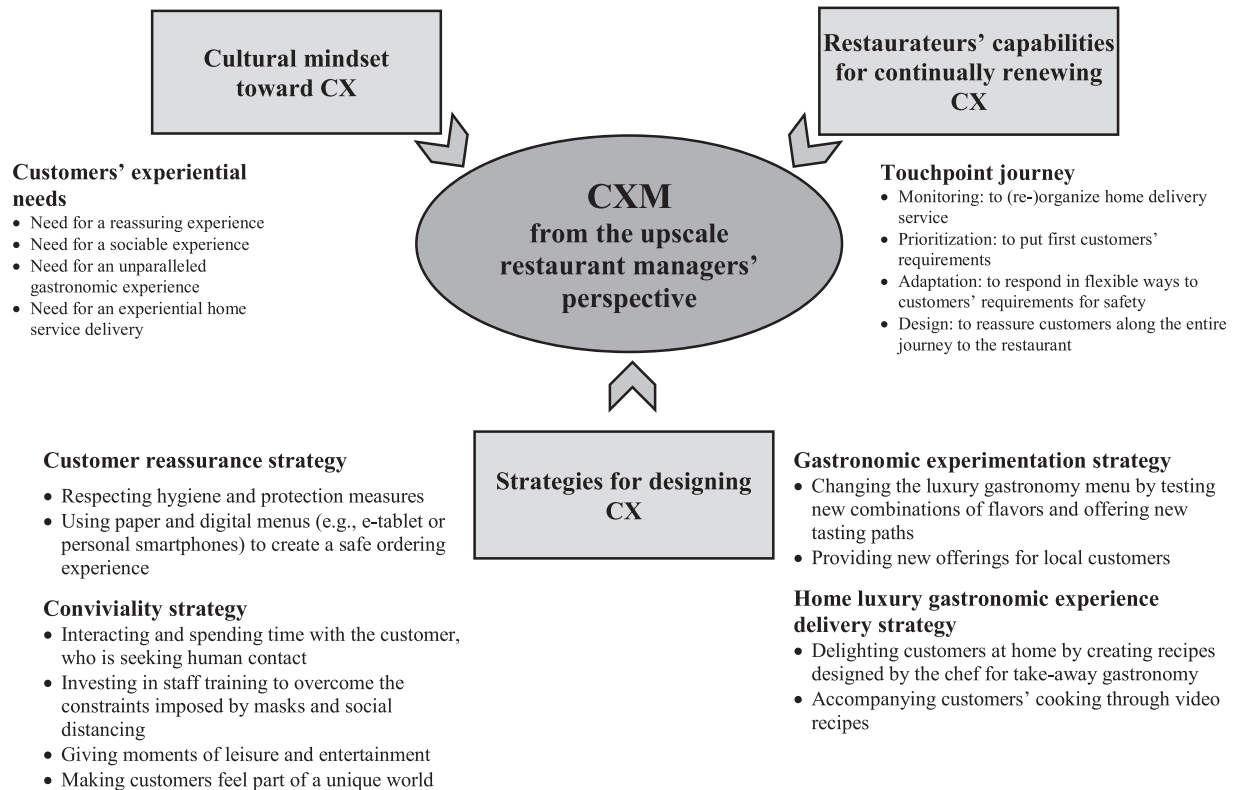


Fig. 1. A customer experience management model for winning over customers in upscale restaurants.

capabilities of (re-)organizing, putting first, flexibly responding, and reassuring customers.

Thus, the model highlights the importance of adopting specific strategies and developing appropriate capabilities according to the ever-evolving needs of customers in such a way that managers of upscale restaurants can continually offer their customers memorable experiences as well as win over further customers.

5. Discussion

As recommended by [Gursoy and Chi \(2020, pp. 528–529\)](#) with reference to restaurants, “it is critical to generate new knowledge that can provide insight to the industry about how to transform their operations according to newly emerging customers’ needs and wants due to the Covid-19 pandemic.” Although several studies have been published in the hospitality literature since the beginning of the pandemic, very few have addressed CXM in upscale restaurants. By focusing on customers’ needs and related managerial strategies in Michelin-starred restaurants worldwide, this study provides new knowledge that can be beneficial to various upscale restaurants. The results reveal that restaurant managers are particularly attentive to customers’ needs and strive to create satisfactory CX; in this regard, there is substantial continuity in customers’ core needs since the beginning of the pandemic, even if these well-established needs have assumed new dimensions. In this sense, the hedonic nature of the Michelin-starred dining experience ([Kiatkawsin and Han, 2019](#)) remains unaltered, and is still characterized by the need for immersive and amazing experiences. This means that customers need to be physically and emotionally part of the experience, and that they expect to enjoy unexpectedly positive experiences that go beyond their expectations. However, these core needs have been enriched with specific dimensions that emerged with the pandemic. These new dimensions have not changed the nature of the critical needs satisfied by Michelin-starred restaurants, but instead, have emphasized different aspects of the experience. Specifically, immersive experiences should also consider safety and conviviality, while amazing experiences should focus on product and service innovation. Given the current situation, the need for safety was expected. Safety represents an implicit need in CXM—its presence does not generate satisfaction, but its absence generates extreme dissatisfaction. The increased need for conviviality, which the respondents strongly emphasized, can be considered an attractive requirement, able to generate high satisfaction if present. The pandemic has greatly limited social interactions, and, consequently, individuals place new value on interpersonal interactions and the human touch. On the one hand, this implies that customers indulge in these occasions when they share a dining experience with their family or friends; on the other hand, customers attribute increasing importance to their relationships with restaurant staff, which plays a crucial role in transferring the authenticity, uniqueness, and personalization of the CX.

Innovation in cuisine or through home delivery represents a crucial change in customers’ needs for amazing experiences. To respond to these emerging needs, restaurants managers have had to adapt their consolidated CXM strategies by introducing elements of novelty in food preparation or new services. As a result of these changes, restaurants have developed and implemented new strategies during the customer journey. Customer experiential immersion and engagement alone were not enough to guarantee an immersive experience in terms of safety and sociability, and therefore, restaurants have introduced reassurance and conviviality strategies. Similarly, customer intrigue and listening strategies have been enriched by innovation in terms of products and services. This process has led restaurants to a new approach; one that may endure even after the pandemic. Specifically, while the reassurance strategy may become implicit, greater conviviality and product innovation would represent a distinctive feature of CXM strategies for Michelin-starred restaurants. The experiential delivery service, which has been successfully implemented during the pandemic by several

restaurants, may not be continued in a Covid-free scenario. For Michelin-starred restaurants, the physical servicescape still plays a central role in their competitive positioning. In fact, attending one of these restaurants brings an allure of exclusivity that customers may miss in the case of home delivery.

All the strategies used before the pandemic, and the strategies of conviviality and gastronomic experimentation that emerged after the pandemic outbreak, are expected to continue. Differing opinions emerged regarding the home luxury gastronomic experience delivery strategy: some argued that this strategy represents attention to customers’ needs, but others claimed that it only satisfied a transient momentary need for this experience. In this second case, restaurateurs fear the risk of bad publicity because customers cannot have the same quality of dish cooked precisely according to the calibration of the chef, or feel the same satisfaction they would experience at the restaurant. Therefore, the future of this strategy is uncertain. Some restaurateurs argued that their home luxury gastronomic experience delivery can increase turnover and bring more customers to their restaurants, while others intended to abandon this approach in the future and remain faithful to the creation of an immersive and amazing experience that can exclusively be enjoyed inside the restaurant.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study empirically investigated restaurateurs’ perceptions of both customers’ changing needs following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the CXM strategies that are currently being used and could be retained in the future to provide memorable CX. The findings contribute to advancing knowledge regarding customer needs in the upscale (especially Michelin-starred) restaurant industry, and in the CXM literature. With regard to customers’ emerging needs, this is the first study to focus on this topic following the outbreak of the pandemic. While previous studies have focused on customers’ perceptions regarding perceived risk and the motivations for ([Yost and Cheng, 2021](#)) or drivers of dining out behavior ([Jeong et al., 2021](#)), this research provides an original contribution to the literature by confirming the hedonic nature of CX in upscale restaurants (i.e., CX should be immersive and amazing), despite customers’ needs for safety.

In terms of CXM, this research examined the strategies that restaurant managers have implemented to provide their customers with an experience before and after the pandemic outbreak, by highlighting how CXM strategies have changed. Early studies following the onset of the pandemic focused on crisis management and financial recovery strategies ([Yost et al., 2021](#)), restaurants’ resilience and business continuity strategies ([Burhan et al., 2021](#)), and socially responsible strategies adopted by Michelin-starred restaurants ([Batat, 2021](#)). In contrast, this research explicitly addresses CXM by identifying new strategies implemented by upscale restaurants to maintain customers’ high expectations of the culinary experience. The findings suggest the importance of enhancing human contact, which is implemented in restaurants in terms of reassurance and conviviality strategies. In this regard, this research extends the results of previous studies on small independent restaurants, such as [Kim et al. \(2021a\)](#), which assessed the effect of clean and safe food message framing on customer repurchase intention. In addition, the findings advise offering novelty to customers by implementing a gastronomic experimentation strategy. This strategy is in line with studies on creating memorable tourism experiences, according to which newness is operationalized by offering a new, once-in-a-lifetime, unique experience ([Farber and Hall, 2007](#); [Kim et al., 2012](#)). Finally, this research highlights how CXM is not limited to within restaurants, but can be extended beyond the company boundaries. Through a home luxury gastronomic experience delivery strategy, restaurateurs can create an experience inside their customers’ home, accompanying them in cooking the dish and, thus, helping them live a moment as starred

chefs. In this way, customers can equally perceive the experiential value of the product that they buy outside the upscale restaurant, which would not have been possible before the pandemic.

Furthermore, in line with previous studies (e.g., [Homburg et al., 2017](#)), this research provides practical evidence that CXM in upscale restaurants can be examined from the organizational perspective and modeled via a framework that includes cultural mindset toward CX, strategic directions for designing CX, and firm capabilities to continuously renew CX. The findings of this study provide an original theoretical contribution that enriches the literature on CXM. Precisely, this study fills a research gap in CXM literature in the hospitality context from an organizational perspective and proposes a framework that can be broadly used to satisfy customers in upscale restaurants even after the health emergency is over.

6.2. Practical implications

According to these results, upscale restaurant managers must continue to provide their customers with memorable experiences—customers themselves asked for this even during the most challenging period of the pandemic. This study highlights that restaurateurs' efforts have aimed to create different experiential occasions after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to meet their customers' experiential needs, which—according to restaurateurs—have changed, from desiring immersive and amazing to reassuring, sociable, and unparalleled gastronomic experiences, to which we add experiential home service delivery. Therefore, this research suggests restaurant managers continuously invest in customer experiential needs analysis because they are constantly changing. To move toward this, which requires capturing customer data on attitude and sensorial and behavioral responses, this study confirms the importance of developing a cultural mindset toward CX at the organizational level ([Homburg et al., 2017](#)). This requires the creation of an organizational culture that embraces CXM; namely, CX must be pervasive in the norms and values that all restaurateurs, chefs, frontline personnel, and employees adopt in terms of individual and group behavior toward internal and external customers—that is, those who dine in, or out of, the upscale restaurant. This cultural mindset will be effectively developed within upscale restaurants if customers appreciate and value their experience.

Another important suggestion provided by the CXM framework used in this study includes strategies for designing CX; in particular, the strategies of customer reassurance, conviviality, gastronomic experimentation, and home luxury gastronomic experience delivery emerged from this research. Specifically, regarding the customer reassurance strategy, this study suggests that technology can be used to communicate with customers and develop a continuous relationship regarding the services and menus offered by restaurants. Restaurants should leverage online and offline media and new technologies to promote their local gastronomic culture. Certification and information regarding the use of high-quality raw materials, organic food, the preservation of tradition, and cooking methods could also be communicated.

Regarding the conviviality strategy, the restaurateurs perceived that customers—especially after the pandemic—are seeking human contact and, thus, desire to interact when they dine in upscale restaurants. More precisely, this research suggests restaurateurs, chefs, and frontline personnel invest their time with customers by creating occasions for leisure and entertainment. In support of this, their training has to be developed in terms of not only service quality skills but also knowledge about further elements that customers are increasingly interested in, such as local culture, traditions related to dishes and luxury cuisine, or experiential paths of tasting. In this last regard, this suggestion is in line with previous studies ([Baratta et al., 2022](#)) that highlight the importance of developing experiential training to help employees better communicate and interact with customers and, accordingly, create appealing and memorable experiences, making customers feel part of a unique world.

Regarding the gastronomic experimentation strategy, cooperation

with other scientific disciplines could contribute to the development of gastronomy itself. For this, a restaurant could offer new services such as a gastronomy library, cooking school, wine tasting, and tasting venues. A good example is award-winning chef René Redzepi's famous restaurant, Noma, where in 2004 he organized a symposium on "new Scandinavian cuisine," whose key element was the connection of all stakeholders (chefs, producers, companies, and agencies) around Scandinavian cuisine. Furthermore, another good practice would be to create new collaborations with local restaurants and other stakeholders to organize gastronomic festivals with local products, cooking competitions, and the participation of famous chefs and restaurants. Examples of this include "Taste of Chicago," which offers Italian and Chinese cuisine experiences in Chicago neighborhoods, and the Paul Bocuse restaurant, which holds regular temporary exhibitions in Lyon where visitors can enjoy tastings, learn about nutrition and cooking, attend demonstrations, and meet chefs-in-residence. As [Mitchell and Schreiber \(2006\)](#) argued, network relationships can be developed vertically by combining visits to wineries and restaurants with traditional local flavors and wines and culinary classes. A key innovative element of this is the educational character of the visit. Chefs combine traditional local gastronomy with their own creative and innovative ideas to convey traditional recipes and adapt them to modern life by emphasizing their local identity and authenticity. These CXM strategies should be supported at national, regional, and local levels in terms of gastronomic portfolio, communication program, and gastronomic brand.

In terms of the home luxury gastronomic experience delivery strategy, this study reveals how the pandemic has created an opportunity for these restaurants to provide customers with an opportunity to share memorable experiences with friends and relatives or to purchase this experience as a gift. Experienced chefs and enologists could also develop cooking and culinary programs for professionals and amateurs. These courses could prepare customers, in terms of theory, practice, and new technologies, to engage in cooking at a high level. Amateur classes could explore the local way of life, traditions, and tastes. This could be combined with excursions to places and attractions focusing on the gastronomic tradition, culinary art, local products, history, and culture to develop conviviality.

In addition, this study outlines the importance of continuously renewing CX by developing capabilities that are aimed at delivering experience among touchpoints. As emerged from this study, restaurant managers could invest in the four following activities: a) touchpoint journey monitoring by coordinating the performance of specific touchpoints, b) touchpoint prioritization by creating unique and renewed culinary creations, c) touchpoint adaptation by taking customers' needs to heart and personalizing their experience, and d) touchpoint journey design by enhancing experiences through relationships and communication activities.

Finally, the upscale restaurateurs learned some key lessons from surviving the hard times of the pandemic that could help them to be better prepared for major crises in the future. These lessons also represent the biggest challenges upscale restaurants will face in the next years. First, investing in the training and education of employees is crucial to designing and implementing a memorable customer experience in times of crisis. Having knowledgeable and well-trained employees facilitates the organizational activities inside the restaurant and helps guarantee business continuity. Second, ensuring safety (of product, place, and service) is fundamental to delivering CX quality without compromises. In this regard, it is also essential to develop close collaborative relationships with local suppliers to ensure high-quality supply standards, even in the case of temporary scarcity of raw materials. Third, in upscale restaurants, customers expect the CX to be tailored around them and their needs in a sort of "escapist experience," especially in times of crisis. In this sense, creating and maintaining personal contact with customers is vital to understand their needs and thus to convey a memorable dining experience. Finally, this study highlights the importance of having a crisis management plan to guarantee restaurants'

resilience and ability to deliver high-quality, memorable CXs in times of crisis.

6.3. Conclusions

This study provides an original contribution to the literature on CXM in upscale restaurants following the pandemic. It highlights that dining out has developed increasingly important and unique aspects in terms of customers' needs and how restaurant managers are investing to enhance their CXM strategies. Immersive and amazing experiences were the primary needs to be met before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, while reassuring and sociable experiences, as well as experiential unparalleled gastronomic and home service delivery, have emerged as needs after the outbreak. Customer experiential immersion, engagement, intrigue, and listening were the strategies for CXM before the pandemic, while customer reassurance, conviviality, gastronomic experimentation, and home luxury gastronomic experience delivery have been implemented since the outbreak of the pandemic. A CXM framework from the organizational perspective, based on cultural mindset toward CX, strategies for designing CX, and restaurants' capabilities for continuously renewing CX, could be implemented in the future inside upscale restaurants to continue to compete even after the ongoing health emergency.

This study has some limitations that could serve as prompts for future research. These include the small number of managers interviewed, which limits the representativeness of outcomes, although it does facilitate the conceptualization of the phenomenon under study. In addition, only one person was interviewed from each restaurant. In future, research could overcome these limitations by examining both a larger sample of managers and more staff from each restaurant, and by monitoring strategic developments in relation to the changing environment through a longitudinal study. In addition, very few units of analysis have been investigated in regional terms. Future research could overcome this limitation by examining possible regional differences to provide a more global picture.

Good food is the foundation of genuine happiness

Auguste Escoffier

French chef and writer (1846–1935)

Declarations of interest

None.

Data Availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

References

- Alhelalat, J.A., Ma'moun, A.H., Twaissi, N.M., 2017. The impact of personal and functional aspects of restaurant employee service behaviour on customer satisfaction. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 66 (September), 46–53.
- Andrieu, J., Batat, W., 2019. TV cuisine therapy through narrative cooking programs: how does culinary journalism contribute to food pleasure and wellbeing?. In: *Food and Experiential Marketing*. Routledge, pp. 57–70.
- Ariffin, A.A.M., Maghzi, A., 2012. A preliminary study on customer expectations of hotel hospitality: influences of personal and hotel factors. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 31, 191–198.
- Baratta, R., Bonfanti, A., Cucci, M., Simeoni, F., 2022. Enhancing cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences: the "Food Democracy Museum" as a phygital project. *Sinergie Ital. J. Manag.* 40 (1), 213–236.
- Batat, W., 2021. How Michelin-starred chefs are being transformed into social bricoleurs? An online qualitative study of luxury foodservice during the pandemic crisis. *J. Serv. Manag.* 32 (1), 87–99.
- Beldona, S., Buchanan, N., Miller, B.L., 2014. Exploring the promise of e-tablet restaurant menus. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 26 (3), 367–382.
- Bitner, M.J., 1992. Servicescapes – the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees. *J. Mark.* 56, 57–71.
- Björk, P., Kauppinen-Räsänen, H., 2017. Interested in eating and drinking? How food affects travel satisfaction and the overall holiday experience. *Scand. J. Hosp. Tour.* 17 (1), 9–26.
- Bowen, D.E., Schneider, B., 2014. A service climate synthesis and future research agenda. *J. Serv. Res.* 17, 5–22.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2019. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual. Res. Sport Exerc. Health* 11 (4), 589–597.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2021a. Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Couns. Psychother. Res.* 21 (1), 37–47.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2021b. To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qual. Res. Sport Exerc. Health* 13 (2), 201–216.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2021c. One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 18 (3), 328–352.
- Burhan, M., Salam, M.T., Abou Hamdan, O., Tariq, H., 2021. Crisis management in the hospitality sector SMEs in Pakistan during COVID-19. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 98, 103037.
- Campbell, M.C., Inman, J.J., Kirmani, A., Price, L.L., 2020. In times of trouble: a framework for understanding consumers' responses to threats. *J. Consum. Res.* 47 (3), 311–326.
- Canny, I.U., 2014. Measuring the mediating role of dining experience attributes on customer satisfaction and its impact on behavioral intentions of casual dining restaurant in Jakarta. *Int. J. Innov. Manag. Technol.* 5 (1), 25–29.
- Chandralal, L., Valenzuela, F., 2013. Exploring memorable tourism experiences: antecedents and behavioural outcomes. *J. Econ. Bus. Manag.* 1 (2), 117–181.
- Chang, T.Y., Horng, S.C., 2010. Conceptualizing and measuring experience quality: the customer's perspective. *Serv. Ind. J.* 30, 2401–2419.
- Chi, C.G., Ekinci, Y., Ramkissoon, H., Thorpe, A., 2022. Evolving effects of Covid-19 safety precaution expectations, risk avoidance, and socio-demographics factors on customer hesitation toward patronizing restaurants and hotels. *J. Hosp. Manag.* 1–17.
- Chiu, H.C., Pant, A., Hsieh, Y.C., Lee, M., Hsiao, Y.T., Roan, J., 2014. Snowball to avalanche: understanding the different predictors of the intention to propagate online marketing messages. *Eur. J. Mark.* 48 (7/8), 1255–1273.
- Chou, S.-F., Sam, Liu, C.-H., Lin, J.-Y., 2021. Critical criteria for enhancing consumption intention in restaurants during COVID-19. *Br. Food J.*
- Cloutier, C., Ravasi, D., 2021. Using tables to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Strateg. Organ.* 19 (1), 113–133.
- Coelho, F., Augusto, M., Lages, L.F., 2011. Contextual factors and the creativity of frontline employees: the mediating effects of role stress and intrinsic motivation. *J. Retail.* 87, 31–45.
- Daries, N., Marine-Roig, E., Ferrer-Rosell, B., Cristobal-Fransi, E., 2021. Do high-quality restaurants act as pull factors to a tourist destination? *Tour. Anal.* 26 (2–3), 195–210.
- Dedeoğlu, B.B., Boğan, E., 2021. The motivations of visiting upscale restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic: the role of risk perception and trust in government. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 95, 102905.
- Delcourt, C., Gremier, D.D., Van Riel, A.C.R., Van Birgelen, M.J.H., 2016. Employee emotional competence. *J. Serv. Res.* 19, 72–87.
- Edelman, D.C., Singer, M., 2015. Competing on customer journeys. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* 93, 88–100.
- Emenheiser, D.A., Clay, J.M., Palakurthi, R., 1998. Profiles of successful restaurant managers for recruitment and selection in the US. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 10 (2), 54–62.
- Fan, X., Im, J., Miao, L., Tomas, S., Liu, H., 2021. Silk and steel: a gendered approach to career and life by upper echelon women executives in the hospitality and tourism industry in China. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 97, 103011.
- Farber, M.E., Hall, T.E., 2007. Emotion and environment: visitors' extraordinary experiences along the Dalton highway in Alaska. *J. Leis. Res.* 39 (2), 248–270.
- Fatimah, U.Z.A.U., Boo, H.C., Sambasivan, M., Salleh, R., 2011. Foodservice hygiene factors—the consumer perspective. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 30, 38–45.
- Ford, R.C., Dickson, D.R., 2012. Enhancing customer self-efficacy in co-producing service experiences. *Bus. Horiz.* 55, 179–188.
- Fusté-Forné, F., 2021. Robot chefs in gastronomy tourism: what's on the menu? *Tour. Manag. Perspect.* 37 (January), 100774.
- Fusté-Forné, F., Hussain, A., 2020. We are open: understanding crisis management of restaurants as pandemic hits tourism. *J. Hosp.* 3 (1), 41–48.
- Gajić, M., 2015. Gastronomic tourism. A way of tourism in growth. *Quaestus Multidiscip. Res. J.* 155–166.
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., Hall, C.M., 2020. Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *J. Sustain. Tour.* 1–20.
- Guba, E.G., Lincoln, Y. 1989. *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Gunden, N., Morosan, C., DeFranco, A., 2020. Consumers' intentions to use online food delivery systems in the USA. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 32 (3), 1325–1345.
- Gursoy, D., Chi, C.G., 2020. Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on hospitality industry: review of the current situations and a research agenda. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* 29 (5), 527–529.
- Ha, J., Jang, S., 2013. Attributes, consequences, and consumer values: a means-end chain approach across restaurant segments. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 25 (3), 383–409.
- Hakim, M.P., Zanetta, L.D.A., da Cunha, D.T., 2021. Should I stay, or should I go? Consumers' perceived risk and intention to visit restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. *Food Res. Int.* 141, 110152.

- Harrington, R.J., Ottenbacher, M.C., Staggs, A., Powell, F.A., 2012. Generation Y consumers key restaurant attributes affecting positive and negative experiences. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* 36 (4), 431–449.
- Herbert, M., Robert, I., Saucède, F., 2018. Going liquid: French food retail industry experiencing an interregnum. *Consum. Mark. Cult.* 21 (5), 445–474.
- Heung, V.C., Gu, T., 2012. Influence of restaurant atmospherics on patron satisfaction and behavioral intentions. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 31 (4), 1167–1177.
- Hoang, T., Suleri, J., 2021. Customer behaviour in restaurants before and during COVID-19: a study in Vietnam. *Res. Hosp. Manag.* 11 (3), 205–214.
- Hogg, G., Liao, M.-H., O’Gorman, K., 2014. Reading between the lines: multidimensional translation in tourism consumption. *Tour. Manag.* 42 (June), 157–164.
- Holmlund, M., Van Vaerenbergh, Y., Ciuchita, R., Ravald, A., Sarantopoulos, P., Ordenes, F.V., Zaki, M., 2020. Customer experience management in the age of big data analytics: a strategic framework. *J. Bus. Res.* 116, 356–365.
- Homburg, C., Jozić, D., Kuehnl, C., 2017. Customer experience management: toward implementing an evolving marketing concept. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* 45 (3), 377–401.
- Hunter-Jones, P., Sudbury-Riley, L., Al-Abidin, A., 2022. Understanding the relationship between terminal illness and tourism: an exploratory study. *Tour. Manag.* 88, 104397.
- Hwang, J., Seo, S., 2016. A critical review of research on customer experience management: theoretical, methodological and cultural perspectives. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 28 (10), 2218–2246.
- Jain, N.R.K., Liu-Lastres, B., Wen, H., 2021. Does robotic service improve restaurant customer experiences? An application of the value-co-creation framework. *J. Foodserv. Bus. Res.* 1–19.
- Jeannot, F., Dampérat, M., Salvador, M., Maalej, M.E.E., Jongmans, E., 2022. Toward a luxury restaurant renewal: antecedents and consequences of digitalized gastronomy experiences. *J. Bus. Res.* 146, 518–539.
- Jeong, M., Kim, K., Ma, F., DiPietro, R., 2021. Key factors driving customers’ restaurant dining behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 34 (2), 836–858.
- Kandampully, J., Zhang, T.C., Jaakkola, E., 2018. Customer experience management in hospitality: a literature synthesis, new understanding and research agenda. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 30 (1), 21–56.
- Khan, M.A., 2020. Technological disruptions in restaurant services: impact of innovations and delivery services. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* 44 (5), 715–732.
- Kiatkawsin, K., Han, H., 2019. What drives customers’ willingness to pay price premiums for luxury gastronomic experiences at Michelin-starred restaurants? *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 82, 209–219.
- Kim, J., 2014. The antecedents of memorable tourism experiences: the development of a scale to measure the destination attributes associated with memorable experiences. *Tour. Manag.* 44, 34–45.
- Kim, J., Yang, K., Min, J., White, B., 2022. Hope, fear, and consumer behavioral change amid COVID-19: application of protection motivation theory. *Int. J. Consum. Stud.* 46 (2), 558–574.
- Kim, J.H., 2018. The impact of memorable tourism experiences on loyalty behaviors: the mediating effects of destination image and satisfaction. *J. Travel Res.* 57 (7), 856–870.
- Kim, J.-H., Ritchie, B.J.R., McCormick, B., 2012. Development of a scale to measure memorable tourism experiences. *J. Travel Res.* 51 (1), 12–25.
- Kim, K., Bonn, M.A., Cho, M., 2021a. Clean safety message framing as survival strategies for small independent restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* 46, 423–431.
- Kim, M., Kim, E.J., Bai, B., 2021b. Examining restaurant purchase intention during crises: the role of message appeal. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 33 (12), 4373–4390.
- Kim, W.G., Lee, Y., Yoo, Y., 2006. Predictors of relationship quality and relationship outcomes in luxury restaurants. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* 30 (2), 143–169.
- Klink, R.R., Zhang, J.Q., Athaide, G.A., 2021. Measuring customer experience management and its impact on financial performance. *Eur. J. Mark.* 55 (3), 840–867.
- Koch, T., 1994. Establishing rigour in qualitative research: the decision trail. *J. Adv. Nurs.* 19, 976–986.
- Kostromitina, M., Keller, D., Cavusoglu, M., Beloin, K., 2021. “His lack of a mask ruined everything.” Restaurant customer satisfaction during the COVID-19 outbreak: an analysis of Yelp review texts and star-ratings. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 98, 103048.
- Kranzbühler, A., Kleijnen, M.H.P., Morgan, R.E., Teerling, M., 2018. The multilevel nature of customer experience research: an integrative review and research agenda. *Int. J. Manag. Rev.* 20 (2), 433–456.
- Larsen, S., 2007. Aspects of a psychology of the tourist experience. *J. Hosp. Tour.* 7 (1), 7–18.
- Lee, J.H., Hwang, J., 2011. Luxury marketing: the influences of psychological and demographic characteristics on attitudes toward luxury restaurants. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 30 (3), 658–669.
- Lincoln, Y.S., Guba, E.G., 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Lu, L., Zhang, P., Zhang, T.C., 2021. Leveraging “human-likeness” of robotic service at restaurants. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 94 (April), 102823.
- Ma, E., Bao, Y., Huang, L., Wang, D., Kim, M., 2021. When a robot makes your dinner: a comparative analysis of product level and customer experience between the US and Chinese robotic restaurants. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* 1–28.
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V.D., Guassora, A.D., 2016. Sample size in qualitative interview studies: guided by information power. *Qual. Health Res.* 26 (13), 1753–1760.
- Mansoor, M., Awan, T.M., Alobidyeen, B., 2020. Structure and measurement of customer experience management. *Int. J. Bus. Adm. Stud.* 6 (4), 171–182.
- Mathwick, C., Wagner, J., Unni, R., 2010. Computer mediated customization tendency (CMCT) and the adaptive e-service experience. *J. Retail.* 86, 11–21.
- Mehroliia, S., Alagarsamy, S., Solaikuttu, V.M., 2021. Customers response to online food delivery services during Covid-19 outbreak using binary logistic regression. *Int. J. Consum. Stud.* 45 (3), 396–408.
- Mitchell, R., Schreiber, C., 2006. Wine tourism networks and clusters: Operation and barriers in New Zealand. In: Michael, E.J. (Ed.), *Micro-Clusters and Networks: The Growth of Tourism*. Routledge, London, pp. 79–105.
- Muller, C.C., Woods, R.H., 1994. An expanded restaurant typology. *Cornell Hotel Restaur. Adm. Q.* 35 (3), 27–37.
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., Moules, N.J., 2017. Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *Int. J. Qual. Methods* 16 (1), 1609406917733847.
- Otnes, C.C., Ilhan, B.E., Kulkarni, A., 2012. The language of marketplace rituals: implications for customer experience management. *J. Retail.* 88, 367–383.
- Palmer, A., 2010. Customer experience management: a critical review of an emerging idea. *J. Serv. Mark.* 24 (3), 196–208.
- Park, C., 2004. Efficient or enjoyable? Consumer values of eating-out and fast food restaurant consumption in Korea. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 23 (1), 87–94.
- Patrício, L., Fisk, R.P., Cunha, J.F.E., 2008. Designing multi-interface service experiences – the service experience blueprint. *J. Serv. Res.* 10, 318–334.
- Piqueras-Fiszman, B., Jaeger, S.R., 2015. What makes meals ‘memorable’? A consumer centric exploration. *Food Res. Int.* 76 (2), 233–242.
- Pratt, M.G., Kaplan, S., Whittington, R., 2020. Editorial essay: the tumult over transparency: Decoupling transparency from replication in establishing trustworthy qualitative research. *Adm. Sci. Q.* 65 (1), 1–19.
- Rubin, H.J., Rubin, I.S., 2011. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Sage.
- Ryu, K., Jang, S., 2008. DINESCAPE: a scale for customers’ perception of dining environments. *J. Foodserv. Bus. Res.* 11 (1), 2–22.
- Ryu, K., Han, H., 2011. New or repeat customers: how does physical environment influence their restaurant experience? *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 30 (3), 599–611.
- Ryu, K., Lee, H.-R., Kim, W.G., 2012. The influence of the quality of the physical environment, food, and service on restaurant image, customer perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 24 (2), 200–223.
- Şahin, A., Çolakoğlu, Ü., Özdoğan, O.N., 2021. A research on customer experiences and perceptions for Michelin starred restaurants. *J. Multidiscip. Acad. Tour.* 6 (1), 61–72.
- San-Martin, S., Jiménez, N., Puente, N., 2019. Bridging the gap between customer experience management and mobile shopping. *Rev. Bras. Gest. Neg.* 21, 213–233.
- Schmitt, B.H. 2003. *Customer Experience Management: A Revolutionary Approach to Connecting with Your Customers*. John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.
- Song, H.J., Yeon, J., Lee, S., 2021. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the U.S. restaurant industry. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 92 (September 2020), 102702.
- Soon, J.M., Vanany, I., Wahab, I.R.A., Sani, N.A., Hamdan, R.H., Jamaludin, M.H., 2022. Protection motivation theory and consumers’ food safety behaviour in response to COVID-19. *Food Control* 138, 109029.
- Strauss, A., Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi.
- Suarez, N., Berezina, K., Yang, W., Gordon, S., 2019. Are restaurant customers ready for tablet-based menus? *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 31 (7), 2914–2932.
- Tsaur, S.H., Lo, P.C., 2020. Measuring memorable dining experiences and related emotions in fine dining restaurants. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* 29 (8), 887–910.
- Türkeş, M.C., Stăncioiu, A.F., Băltescu, C.A., Marinescu, R.C., 2021. Resilience innovations and the use of food order & delivery platforms by the Romanian restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. *J. Theor. Appl. Electron. Commer. Res.* 16 (7), 3218–3247.
- Verhoef, P.C., Lemon, K.N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., Schlesinger, L. A., 2009. Customer experience creation. Determinants, dynamics and management strategies. *J. Retail.* 85 (1), 31–41.
- Walls, A., Okumus, F., Wang, Y., Kwun, D.J., 2011. Understanding the customer experience: An exploratory study of luxury hotels. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* 20 (2), 166–197.
- Warde, A., Martens, L., 2000. *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure*. Cambridge Press, New York.
- Wei, C.(V.), Chen, H., Lee, Y.M., 2021. Factors influencing customers’ dine out intention during COVID-19 reopening period: the moderating role of country-of-origin effect. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 95 (May), 102894.
- Winchenbach, A., Hanna, P., Miller, G., 2022. Constructing identity in marine tourism diversification. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 95, 103441.
- Witell, L., Kowalkowski, C., Perks, H., Raddats, C., Schwabe, M., Benedettini, O., Burton, J., 2020. Characterizing customer experience management in business markets. *J. Bus. Res.* 116, 420–430.
- Yoon, S.J., Lee, H.J., 2017. Does customer experience management pay off? Evidence from local versus global hotel brands in South Korea. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* 26 (6), 585–605.
- Yost, E., Cheng, Y., 2021. Customers’ risk perception and dine-out motivation during a pandemic: insight for the restaurant industry. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 95, 102889.
- Yost, E., Kizildag, M., Ridderstaat, J., 2021. Financial recovery strategies for restaurants during COVID-19: evidence from the US restaurant industry. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* 47, 408–412.
- Zapata-Cuervo, N., Montes-Guerra, M.I., Jeong, M., 2021. How do restaurants respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? Lessons from Colombian restaurateurs and their survival strategies. *J. Foodserv. Bus. Res.* 1–22.