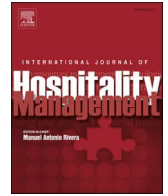


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“I became a child again!” How to stage engaging restaurant experiences modeling the service management process

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ABSTRACT

There is a lack of comprehensive guidance in service marketing literature on how restaurant managers can effectively design structures, allocate resources, and facilitate interactions to co-create value and foster engaging dining experiences. Through our theory-building research, we address this gap in the hospitality service marketing literature by introducing a new restaurant experience staging management model. This model not only identifies critical elements for cultivating engaging dining experiences but also outlines the executive processes involved in achieving this. Our approach integrates existing theoretical frameworks with practical insights gained from an action research methodology applied to three distinct case studies. We delineate three core staging management functions essential for the effective orchestration of restaurant experiences: leadership, artistic performance delivery and insight creation. We also introduce three organizational support practices that are needed for the maximally effective management of staging engaging restaurant experiences.

1. Introduction

To successfully stage engaging restaurant experiences is crucial for achieving customer satisfaction, fostering loyalty, and generating positive word-of-mouth, both online and offline (Jalilvand et al., 2017; Tsaor et al., 2023; Yrjölä et al., 2019). While extensive research has explored frameworks (Hsiao and Yang, 2010), approaches Lee et al. (2019) and methods Bullinger et al. (2003) for service engineering and factors influencing or facilitating the co-creation of customer experiences in restaurants (Ishak et al., 2023; Endang et al., 2023), there is a notable gap in understanding how to manage the staging processes that enhance restaurant service experiences effectively. This gap highlights a need for further research on managerial guidance on transforming experiential ideas into successful business realities. The way forward, we suggest, is to go beyond the general notion that service experience development and management is a linear stepwise process (Hossain et al., 2017) and recognize the specificities pertaining to experience staging in the context of restaurant services. Thus, new insights to advance more focused theory-building are sought by answering the research question: which managerial functions and organizational practices can be identified in the design process of staging engaging restaurant experiences and how can they be effectively employed?

The service design approach, which aims at creating or enhancing customer experiences (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010), places a strong emphasis on understanding their genesis and nature holistically (Bellos and Kavadias, 2021) and focuses on value co-creation processes (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2018). This customer-centric perspective involves mapping customer journeys and identifying touchpoints, often visualized in restaurant settings as service blueprints (Schostack, 1984; Ryu et al., 2020). These blueprints, which in service engineering models can be considered as service design tools (Pezzotta et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016), connect backstage and frontstage operations through an activity line that illustrates different process phases (Rejikumar et al., 2022). Meticulously documented are also factors influencing restaurant experiences, highlighting the significance of the physical environment, the venue, customer interactions, product quality, atmosphere, and reliability (Hansen et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2009; Liu and Tse, 2018; Mathayomchan and Taecharungroj, 2020; Ryu and Hanb, 2011). Additionally, brand image, price levels, and assortment have been recognized as elements adding value to the dining experience (Verhoef et al., 2009; Erkmen and Hancer, 2019), as well as showmanship (McCartney and Yoke, 2024). A comprehensive review by Ishak et al. (2023) identified six dimensions crucial for staging memorable restaurant experiences, including food authenticity, ambiance, lighting, colours, service staff,

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and partnerships with third parties.

Building on the understanding of these influencing factors, [Teixeira et al. \(2012\)](#) developed a holistic Customer Experience Model (CEM) to aid service designers in crafting comprehensive service experiences. This model delineates how individual touchpoint experiences accumulate to form overarching service experiences, which in turn contribute to a broader value constellation. The CEM-model defines experiences and value from a customer's perspective, emphasizing the co-creation of value within a network of actors, artifacts, and technology-enabling systems. However, the literature still lacks detailed guidance on structuring and operating these systems and how to align experience influencing factors from the service provider's perspective, particularly in the context of restaurants ([Rahimian et al., 2021](#), p. 1414). Service management research provides some insights into creating engaging restaurant experiences by emphasizing the importance of managing people, processes, and interactions with a view towards customers' perceived value, sustainable competitive advantage, and long-term organizational success ([Bonfanti et al., 2023](#)). However, a more comprehensive framework detailing service management functions and organizational practices and their integration when staging engaging restaurant experiences is still needed. Such a framework advances the service management literature by detailing the content of restaurant experience staging management, add structure to the many existing mid-range theories used to explain managerial practices, and highlight underexplored areas for further studies. For the hospitality businesses, it provides practical and actionable guidelines for effectively managing the staging of engaging restaurant experiences to achieve positive commercial outcomes.

Our research aims to develop a comprehensive restaurant experience staging process management model through three steps: establishing an initial theoretical framework, gathering in-depth empirical data, and crafting a novel model that not only identifies key factors for creating engaging restaurant experiences but also elucidates the involved managerial functions, processes and practices. With our research, we seek a more thorough level of understanding of how the success of engaging restaurant experience staging hinges of the processual and dynamic interaction between the managerial functions of leadership, artistic performance delivery, and insight creation, and the organizational support practices of service employee empowerment, service process blueprinting, and customer involvement. This unprecedented dissection benefits academics in advancing current theorizations and hospitality and event managers in creating engaging experiences more effectively. This new knowledge is important particularly for those restaurants that prioritize human interactions and personalized experiences in the circumstances where COVID-19 has accelerated digital transformation in the industry ([Youssofi et al., 2024](#); [Bujalance-López et al., 2025](#)). Consequently, this endeavor can help more specialized, small and independent hospitality companies, for instance those focusing on fostering sustainable development and consumer well-being, to thrive.

This exploratory, theory-building research paper unfolds across five chapters, starting with an a priori service management model that frames the subsequent case study analyses. Our qualitative action research methodology is detailed in the third chapter, followed by the presentation of the findings in the fourth. Next, our initial theoretical framework is enriched by the identification and elaboration of three staging management functions, three organizational support practices and their inter-relationships – culminating into our final model in chapter five. We also consider our model in relation to extant frameworks and showcase how nine mid-range theories can be harnessed in future research to dig deeper in the managerial challenges involved in successfully creating engaging restaurant experiences. Finally, we sum up our contribution, discuss limitations and outline future research suggestions.

2. Deriving initial framework for understanding staging management of engaging restaurant experiences

To develop our initial framework, we selectively reviewed and consulted primarily service management literature, while also highlighting relevant findings from other streams of research, such as gastronomy research. We focused on two crucial issues for effective staging management of engaging restaurant experiences: 1) service-scape design and 2) coordination of resources, capabilities and procedures. We used the theoretical lens of service innovation framework ([Wang et al., 2016](#)) to zoom in on and examine restaurants the internal service processes.

Considering our research context, we adapted [Chen et al. \(2021\)](#) customer engagement framework and postulate that firm-based efforts serve as an external impetus to drive customers to engage with a service offering. In turn, this engagement with the service offering – staged by deliberate managerial decisions and employment of available firm resources – can lead, if positive, to improved satisfaction, stronger brand image and more successful value co-creation. Thus, in this study, engaging restaurant experience refers to the management of staged service offerings facilitating customers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. This differs from the memorable dining experience concept, that typically emphasizes customers' perceptions and evaluations of various touchpoints (e.g. food presentation, background soundscape, dish aroma) affecting customer's later recall of patronage (see e.g. [Liu et al., 2022](#); [Ma et al., 2023](#)). In other words, the key distinctions lie in both the perspective (manager versus customer) and the attentional focus (dining touchpoints versus holistic service offerings).

2.1. Servicescape as a platform for designing staging engaging restaurant experiences

Today, the concepts of servicescape and experiencescape are considered intertwined and interdependent, with a history dating back to the 1970s ([Kandampully et al., 2023](#)). The exploration of how the physical environment influences consumer experiences has been a pivotal area of research, initiated by [Kotler's](#) groundbreaking work in 1973. This inquiry was further expanded into the realm of service marketing by [Bitner \(1993\)](#) through the introduction of the "servicescape" concept. Building on this foundation, [Mossberg and Johansen, in 2006](#), proposed the concept of "restaurantscape" ("experiencescape"), which includes the impact of other customers, alongside the physical setting and operational processes, on dining experiences. Recent studies, such as those by [Peng et al. \(2024\)](#), underscore the critical importance, of designing an effective servicescape from a management perspective. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the significant impact of well-designed servicescapes on various aspects of the dining experience, including the perceived quality of the restaurant ([Chang, 2016](#)), customers' emotional states ([Finkelstein, 1989](#); [Ryu and Jang, 2007](#)), satisfaction levels ([Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996](#)), loyalty ([Diab et al., 2016](#)), and the propensity to engage in word-of-mouth promotion ([Jalilvand et al., 2017](#)).

At the core of a dining experience is the food and its presentation ([Akhoondnejda, 2024](#)). Within gastronomy research, the quality of food is assessed based on several criteria, including the ingredients used, aroma, taste, visual presentation, temperature, and the element of surprise and creativity in combining these factors ([Meiselman, 2000](#); [Gustafsson et al., 2006](#)). This comprehensive evaluation of dining quality is often referred to as the "foodscape" of which "platescape" is part ([Lim, Jamaluddin and Er, 2018](#)). [Sulaiman and Haron \(2013\)](#) emphasize the importance of food presentation and freshness in appealing to customers, a sentiment echoed by [Ryu et al. \(2012\)](#), who found food quality to be paramount in a Chinese restaurant. Additionally, [Bujisic et al. \(2014\)](#) affirm that food, service, and ambiance collectively impact consumer behaviour, although this influence is moderated by the restaurant type.

In addition to the foodscape, the interaction between service providers and customers in a restaurant encompasses various forms of contact, including visual, physical, verbal, and emotional interactions. The attire (Wang and Lang, 2019), body shape (McFerran et al., 2010) and communication style (Bourdin et al., 2024) of service employees significantly influence the dining experience. Hansen et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of professionalism, empathy, and human connection in service delivery, as echoed by Lemmink and Mattsson (1998) and Walter et al. (2010). The effects of the employees' showmanship on restaurant experiences were studied by McCartney and Yoke (2024) using semi-structured interviews with 15 hospitality executives. The findings prove positive effects of showmanship on dining satisfaction. The ambiance generated by service processes plays a crucial role in shaping the dining atmosphere, potentially evoking feelings of warmth, comfort (Lashley et al., 2007), and authenticity (Jang et al., 2011). These front-stage experience influencing factors encountered by diners during the service process are essential for the co-creation of experiential value (Im and Qu, 2017), processes which are to be coordinated and managed.

2.2. Capabilities, strategic considerations, and processes for management of staging engaging restaurant experience

Service management, as articulated by Grönroos (1994), embodies a comprehensive approach prioritizing customer relationships, perceived quality, and holistic experiences, today also including the processes of value co-creation (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). It encompasses organizational capabilities (Chien and Tsai, 2012), strategic considerations (Alonos-Almeida et al., 2015), and insights in dynamic processes (Wellton and Lainpelto, 2021) to 1) discerning the value customers derive from utilizing the organization's offerings and how services, whether standalone or in conjunction with tangible goods, contribute to this value; 2) understanding the mechanisms through which an organization (including personnel, technology, physical resources, systems, and customers) can stage for and enable value-in-use (Kristensson et al., 2008); 3) determining the optimal development and management strategies to ensure a good restaurant experiences of value; and 4) ensuring organizational operations align with achieving this value, thus meeting

the objectives of all stakeholders involved.

Consequently, at the core, positioned at the centre of Fig. 1, service management is about pooling of resources in interactions for the benefit of the customers and value (co-) creation (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Schlager and Maas, 2012), accompanied by strategic considerations beyond the immediate service interactions (Kellogg and Nie, 1995), such as organizational adaptability (Staber and Sydow, 2002), effective recruitment, employee training and engagement (Lambert et al., 2021), and the integration of technology (Cavusoglu, 2019)

Synthesizing insights from the service management, marketing, and customer experience literatures (Bitner et al., 2008; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Walter et al., 2010), the discourse has evolved to encompass not only the value perceived by customers but also the dynamics of customer-provider interactions and the management of value co-creation processes. This holistic approach is encapsulated by the servuction model (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987; Ashton et al., 2023) emphasizing the integral role of both frontstage and backstage areas, tangible and (Kincaid et al., 2010) intangible resources (Park and Jang, 2021) in creating a cohesive dining experience accentuated with a good drama in the dining room (Morgan et al., 2008). From a staging management perspective, Mossberg and Johansen (2006) explore how the narrative of a chosen theme or story enhances a restaurant's value proposition, encompassing the physical space, interactions with staff, and tangible takeaways.

To conclude, our conceptual pre-understanding of the staging management process for creating engaging restaurant experiences suggests a dynamic "Plan-Do-Check-Act" process inspired by the Service design (Zomerdiijk and Voss, 2010), Customer experience (Chen et al., 2021) and service quality management theories (Kaynan et al., 2016), guiding the strategic alignment of thematic narratives (theme/story) with both the physical and experiential elements of service delivery. The adoption of service blueprinting and touch-point analysis can further structure and define these interaction processes, facilitating the co-creation of value and enhancing service quality, and the overall dining experience (Hossain et al., 2017).

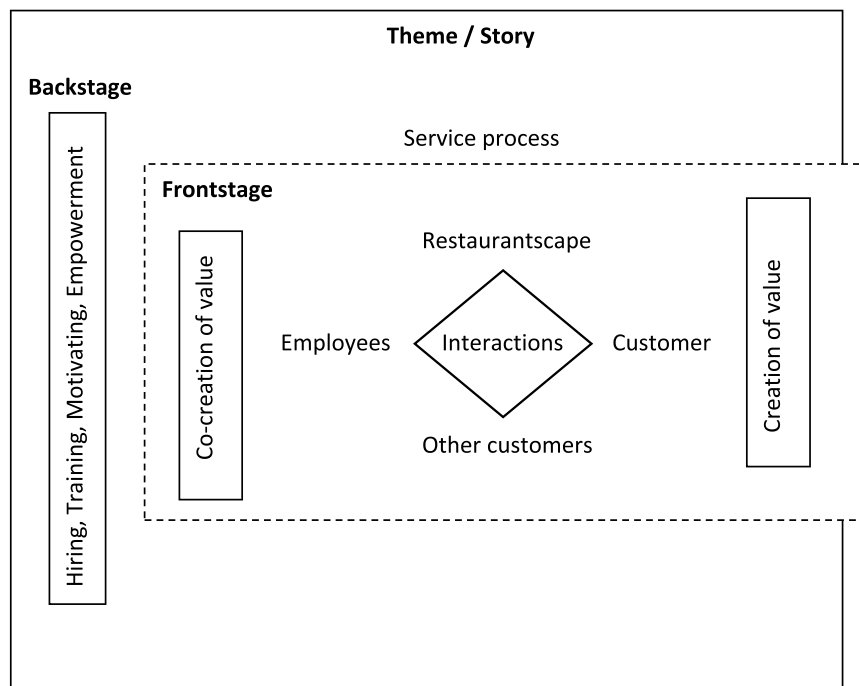


Fig. 1. Staging management of engaging restaurant experience, an initial framework.

3. Methodology: case-based action research approach

In the management and marketing literature, action research has established its position as a constructive methodological approach (see e.g. Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Ozanne and Saatcioglu, 2008; Hammervoll and Bo, 2010; Garcia-Rosell, 2013; Abrahamsen et al., 2016; Virtanen et al., 2017). According to Hammervoll and Bo (2010, p. 1128), action research allows researchers to participate in practical problem solving and to observe the effects of their intervention with the goals to learn about a perceived problem or management challenge, develop in-depth understanding of it, generate new knowledge about it, and point towards effective action to resolve the problem. This is a relatively accurate description of our research. More precisely, we selected the case-based action research approach for our study for the following reasons. First, it works well in the conjunction of case studies (Bocken et al., 2018); second, it suits for tackling processual and dynamic business innovation phenomena (Guldmann and Huulgaard, 2020); and third, its application can help in the development of new service (cf. engaging restaurant experience) (Nunez-Merino et al., 2025).

After a thorough familiarization with the premises of action research methodology, one of the authors enduringly immersed herself with the planning and implementation of three cases involving alternative ways to manage the staging of engaging restaurant experiences. This kind of dual role-taking; on one hand, observing how and why, for instance, a managerial problem-solving effort evolves as it does and, on the other hand, participating in its facilitation is typical in action research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

Based on the extensive empirical data sets, a multi-phased, iterative and reflexive analytical and interpretive process eventually enabled an extraction of a novel staging management process model. This occurred after going through several plan-action-observation-reflection-cycles (Garcia-Rosell, 2013) and an application of a theatrical approach to service performance evaluation (Harris et al., 2011). In effect, our understanding of the focal research phenomenon (service management when staging for engaging restaurant experiences) has continuously deepened as we have moved from Festina Lente (Case 1), through Flora's Day Celebration (Case 2) to Andante Festivo (Case 3). The ultimate climax of this spiral of dialogue between theory and empirical material condenses in the form of novel conceptual model that we offer in the concluding section - the development of theory is central to action research (Garcia-Rosell, 2013, p. 33).

The key methodological decisions pertaining to the implementation of each three cases are summarized in Table 1. In the following, case-specific methodological choices employed to unravel management practices in staging restaurant experiences are outlined.

In the first case, *Festina Lente*, we were primarily interested in how emotional thematization, and dramatization can or should be harnessed by managers in staging highly memorable and holistically engaging restaurant experience. In terms of our initial framework (see Fig. 1), this case primarily sheds light on how the thematization together with restaurantscape and service process design contributes to the creation of engaging restaurant experience (see Table 1, row 6). For a description of the concrete staging solutions of this case, see Appendix A. Students at a local hospitality management school served as workforce and one of the authors was the responsible project leader – she also collected data through non-participatory observation and interviewing. Memos were prepared from the first meeting on, including feedback sessions with students. During the evening of the actual event, non-participatory observation qualified as the major method. Finally, six months later, a focus group interview with five customers was arranged to assess the intensity and content of the memory traces imprinted in their minds by the staged restaurant experience.

Our second case, *Flora's Day Celebration* (took place in May), concentrated on the management challenges of various customer service and engagement processes surrounding the staging of restaurant experiences. Situating our focus in this case with the help of our initial

Table 1
Summary of case methodologies.

Key methodological decision areas	Case I Festina Lente	Case II Flora's Day Celebration	Case III Andante Festivo
1) Key staging management issue	Emotional thematization and dramatization in staging of restaurant experiences	Customer service and engagement processes in staging of restaurant experiences	Scaling and resourcing decisions in staging of restaurant experiences
2) Target customer group	Food fair guests	Personnel of university of applied science	Couples and groups of people, aged 25–60, residing in the area
3) Data collection site and time of year	- Pop-up restaurant - Late summer	- Premises of school of hospitality management - Spring	- Real restaurant - Fall
4) Types of data gathered	- Observation memos - Customer interview transcripts (N = 5) - Project documents	- Observation memos - Video material - Customer interview transcripts + on-site interceptions (N = 8) + post experience focus groups (N = 10) - Project documents	- Observation memos - Interview transcripts + personnel (N = 25) + customers on site (N = 6) - Project documents
5) Design of staged experience	- Theme: slow food dining inspired by local culture - Core product: 5-course dinner served at table - Ambience: artefacts and visual elements rooted in local history - Program: + humorous sketch, use of local dialect + live music - Service: appreciative, straight, brisk	- Theme: food as recreation - Core product: + guided baking of traditional pastry + participatory mini-play + Ready, Steady, Cook-competition + luxurious buffet dinner - Ambience: + regular teaching kitchen + regular classroom, staged as a coffee party hall of early 1900-century + large banquet hall, on stage competition-props and actors + dining hall, decorated with seasonal multi-sensory stimuli - Program: + lectures, dough-rolling, filling in pies, baking, tasting + spectating and participating in mini-play + following pre-scripted performance + social dining, reception of personalized menu-card - Service: educational, escapist,	- Theme: slow food dining inspired by Italian culture - Core product: 5-course dinner served at table - Ambience: classical Italian artefacts and visual elements - Program: + plotted play, acts synchronized with food servings + hosting + live music - Service: warm, personal, caring

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Key methodological decision areas	Case I Festina Lente	Case II Flora's Day Celebration	Case III Andante Festivo
6) Focal conceptual connections in staging management of engaging restaurant experiences	Theme/story construction ↔Service process design	entertaining, aesthetic Customer engagement facilitation ↔Service process choreographing, synchronizing and energizing interactions, frontstage and backstage	Human resource orchestration ↔Value co-creation management

framework (see Fig. 1), the effectiveness of the interplay between the guest engagement measures and the service process choreographing is examined (see Table 1, row 6). For a description of the concrete staging solutions of this case, see Appendix A. A context for our data collection was provided by a school of hospitality management that arranged personnel's workplace health promotion day at its premises (one of the authors works at this school). This time the case set-up followed a systematic or almost experimental logic devised by the authors. In practice, this encompassed ideating, planning and realizing four food-centered events that could potentially be used in staging restaurant experiences in real-life business world. Many of the same data-gathering methods as in Case I were used also here. However, non-participatory observation was supported by video material recorded at various events during the evening. Moreover, as in Case 1, students of the hospitality management school acted as assisting organizers and waitresses.

We decided to move to real restaurant environment in our last case, *Andante Festivo* (meaning 'let's go for a feast'). A test of staging of restaurant experiences in a realistic setting was mandatory as the main managerial question of relevance in this case concerned the trade-offs between the scaling and resourcing decisions on one hand and the value of service offering as perceived by the customers on the other hand. Framing the key research task for this case with reference to our initial framework (see Fig. 1), leads us to acquire understanding of the inter-dependencies between human resource orchestration and value co-creation management (see Table 1, row 6). For a description of the concrete staging solutions of this case, see Appendix A. After screening of a few candidate collaborators, one restaurant, showing a willingness for co-operation and strategic renewal, was selected as the case company (an independent SME). This firm also met the other requirements: sufficiently functional kitchen and dining hall infrastructure and certain level of acquired competence in organizing experiential programs. One of the authors initiated the project with the restaurant manager, but during the multi-phased experience and service design-process other staff members (e.g. main chef and customer service manager) and, again, students of the same hospitality management school contributed to the final outcome. The target customer group was defined to consist of couples and groups of people, aged 25–60, residing in the area. The case-company started to market *Andante Festivo* right after this decision. Again, many forms of data were collected through methods comparable to Cases 1 and 2. Yet, on-site customer interviews, conducted immediately after the conclusion of the evening, were informed by the theatrical approach to service performance evaluation (Harris et al., 2011).

For our study of the cases, the observation memos and interview transcripts served as the primary data. The second author was responsible for planning staged restaurant experiences and executing the fieldwork in all of the cases. She also tentatively classified the data into broad conceptual categories corresponding our initial framework (Fig. 1) and amassed a plenty of raw data examples (from the extensive storage of field notes and interview recordings) in order to ground our analysis and interpretations. She drafted a detailed document reporting

these outputs. At the second phase, the third author produced the first formal descriptive analysis of the cases, using the framework's conceptual main themes – each of them comprising three subthemes – as the organizing principle. At the final stage, the first author critically viewed the descriptive analysis considering it both from the intra- and cross-case perspectives. He then enriched, revised and finalized the analysis – to be presented next.

4. Findings – descriptive analysis of the cases

Our initial conceptual framework, as illustrated in Fig. 1, serves as the basis for describing and analyzing the management of staging processes and decision-making across the three cases. We structure our analysis into two primary sections, focusing on the management processes as they pertain to both backstage and shared (front) stage decision-making. In practice, these dimensions are interconnected, reflecting a holistic approach to orchestrating the overall restaurant experience.

4.1. Management of backstage processes

We begin our analysis with the **backstage** management activities. They consist of theme selection and story construction; service process blueprinting; and human resource management. These three topics directly emanate from our initial framework (see Fig. 1) and will be tackled next one by one.

4.1.1. Theme selection and story construction to initiate the staging process

Our exploration begins with the backstage management activities. The inception of *Festina Lente* was driven by the desire to showcase local cuisine and traditions, aligning with the annual local food festival. Embracing the slow food movement and the significance of local food production, the dining event theme and narrative were heavily inspired by the surrounding culture. The choice of the brand name for marketing purposes emerged from a creative brainstorming session with students, aiming to captivate potential customers' curiosity and ignite their imagination. This thematic direction significantly enhanced the customer experience; for instance, traditional attire, including decorated knife belts and sheaths, sparked considerable conversation among patrons. One customer feedback highlighted staff's welcoming nature and the unique appeal of their attire, particularly the knife belts.

"The waitresses were jolly, natural and the service worked. Moreover, I give credit for the magnificent knife belts they wore."

Additionally, customer interviews revealed appreciation for the slow food concept, with one patron noting the novelty and appeal of dining at a leisurely pace.

"In advance, the slowness was a fascinating idea as typically one eats quickly. Even too quickly, according to the recommendations..."

In contrast, the *Flora's Day Celebration* approached theme selection and storytelling differently, drawing on Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience typology to craft food-related experiences for a health promotion day at a hospitality management school. Collaborative sessions with teachers and students led to the design of experiences that were educational, escapist, entertaining, and aesthetic in nature. This multi-faceted approach resulted in four distinct narratives, each aligning with the overarching theme of food and leisure. The escapist experience, in particular, resonated deeply with guests, as evidenced by their feedback praising the authenticity and impact of the themed mini-play.

"About the Karin's coffee party, it was the best experience. I still remember how the punch tasted."

"I wondered how everything was so carefully thought over. Everything reflected perfectly that period of time and the history of this

place. I have never been in anything like this. It made a huge impression on me.”

The Andante Festivo case presented a unique collaboration with an operational restaurant, emphasizing the importance of initial discussions with the CEO to build trust and align the vision for restaurant experience with the current business strategy. According to the field notes, opting for a slow food-inspired fine dining concept, the focus was placed on Italian cuisine to cater the preferences of restaurant’s clientele while at the same time avoiding the risks associated with less familiar culinary themes.

“As we thought about the clientele of the restaurant, we felt that using for example Chinese or Indonesian theming would be too risky. That’s why we ended up with Italian cuisine. It is more familiar, rich and can be implemented in so many ways.”

This decision was refined through co-creation sessions with students, similar to the process in the Festina Lente case. The thematic execution included a plotted mini-play and live music, elevating the level of dramatization in staging the dining experience compared to the other cases.

4.1.2. Service process blueprinting for restaurant experience staging

Our analysis reveals that the successful service process blueprinting in the Festina Lente case hinged on three critical touchpoints. The first touchpoint involved a welcoming ceremony at the entrance, where the waitstaff formed a guard of honour along a red carpet. The second touchpoint centered on the presentation of a five-course dinner featuring local ingredients, accompanied by a mini-play performance. The final touchpoint occurred as guests departed, with each receiving a "thank you" gift of wrapped mini rye bread pieces accompanied by poetic notes, intended to evoke memories of the experience. This intricate and detailed service blueprint was essential for the successful experience staging. However, the mere existence of a blueprint does not guarantee success—extensive onsite rehearsals are necessary to achieve consistent high-quality service. The field notes indicated areas for improvement, such as enhanced communication between the kitchen and service teams to avoid delays and reduce chaos at the cashier’s desk at the evening’s conclusion.

“We should have rehearsed the service process even more. Now, there were some problems with the communication between the kitchen and service teams, customers had to wait for wine refills too long and there was a little chaos at the cashier when the evening was over.”

For the Flora’s Day Celebration, the team developed detailed service blueprints tailored to each of the four staged experiences. These experiences were segmented into an introduction phase, where guests received specific instructions, followed by divergent experience processes based on the chosen themes and stories. Our observations suggest that increased guest involvement heightens the risk of experience failure. Some guests felt intimidated by the prospect of participating in an escapist staging without clear direction, expressing apprehension about unexpected involvement.

“I typically hate the situations in which I know that I need to participate without a clue what I am supposed to do.”

“First I was wondering that what the hell is going to happen. I was afraid that I will be dragged into it.”

Conversely, when engagement was structured to ensure active participation from all guests, the experience was transformed into something memorable and immersive.

“Baking pies felt wonderful right from the start. Everybody was absorbed into it immediately.”

“I was amazed how people got so carried away with baking the pies. Highly educated people becoming 5-year old children again!”

The service process blueprinting for Andante Festivo, with its carefully defined touchpoints, mirrored that of Festina Lente, including elements such as a reception ceremony, guest escorting, chef interactions, and farewell gift distribution. The proper and enthusiastic execution of such a blueprint can significantly enhance the guest experience.

“It was really great! Servants waited us as we entered through the arc gate and we were given a personal waitress who escorted us to our table.”

However, challenges were also observed, particularly with the less experienced student servers who failed to adhere to the blueprint and avoided engaging with customers. This was actually commented on in the post-experience interviews.

“I think that the key role of waitress is to look after the customers. Our classes lied empty on the table many times. Nothing to drink for anyone.”

Additionally, the professional staff of the restaurant found the novel blueprint challenging to internalize after only a few briefing and rehearsal sessions, leading to confusion and disappointment. The observation notes highlight the importance of thorough training and rehearsal in the implementation of complex service blueprints to ensure clarity and solid performance from all staff members.

“We explained the idea and its implementation to the staff. I could see from their faces that they did not fully comprehend all. They seemed disappointed and confused.”

4.1.3. Human resource management for restaurant experience staging

Of the backstage activities, particularly the recruitment, training, motivation, and empowerment of human resources emerged as significant. A key factor in the success of experiential staging across our cases was the high ratio of service staff in relation to customers. As highlighted in a Festina Lente field note, *“In effect, for every table, we had our own waiter – a scenario unlikely in the conventional restaurant business.”* This indicates that while the additional staffing may enhance engagement, it also incurs greater costs. Here, employment of student workforce facilitated this, having them actively participating in concept development and empowerment processes as well. Yet, even they showed early scepticism about the need for detailed planning, as one field note revealed.

“At the early stages, some students questioned the necessity of highly detailed plans for everything.”

Thus, the reliance on students can also pose risks, such as potential service lapses due to inexperience. As a matter of fact, we noted several service failures.

“Servants should have been more active in asking the customers if they need something and ensuring their happiness.”

This observation held true for both the Flora’s Day Celebration (130 guests) and Andante Festivo (150 guests) cases. The former involved complex preparations across multiple school venues, necessitating extensive logistical efforts and a substantial volunteer force. As one field note described.

“All staff members from our unit and a large number of our students were indispensable in planning and executing the experiences.”

However, the imperative of flawless human resource management and impeccable service quality was somewhat lessened, given that the audience consisted of co-workers, who were more forgiving of imperfections.

Conversely, in the Andante Festivo case, the staffing levels sparked,

as revealed by the field notes, debate from the outset: "No real restaurant can afford such extensive staffing," yet recording also the acknowledgement that "customers need special attention and caretaking for an experiential service delivery". Challenges in motivating and involving the staff were evident, with apparent communication gaps between the project manager, the CEO, and the staff. The field notes captured the sentiments of exclusion and a desire for earlier involvement, "I got the feeling that they would have liked to know about this earlier and have their say on things." and the deviations from the service protocols for efficiency, "The restaurant's own waitresses did not wear the outfits they were supposed and they digressed from the service blueprint to be more effective." The CEO's hindsight reflection, recorded on the field note, recognizes these personnel coordination and engagement oversights.

"We should have assigned someone from our team to be heavily involved from the beginning."

4.2. Management of shared stage processes

Diverging somewhat from our initial framework (see Fig. 1), here we will use the term **shared stage** instead of front stage. We think that it more effectively points to the critical significance of various interactions and co-creative management processes ensuing in our cases. Yet, all the three forms of interactions to be elaborated in the following can be tracked down to our initial framework (see Fig. 1).

4.2.1. Restaurantscape-customer interaction as an enhancer of staged restaurant experience

The enchantment of the Festina Lente dining experience stemmed from the harmonious interplay between a carefully designed restaurantscape and the engagement with guests. Significant time and resources were invested in choosing a suitable venue, curating a themed menu, and crafting an interior design that exuded warmth, tranquillity, and festivity, all set against the backdrop of a historic building in a scenic locale. This bold decision to transform a former storage space into a dining area required extensive renovations and regulatory approvals, as this memo indicates: "...was not a real restaurant or as such applicable for food catering – it has served as a storage before." Despite these challenges, the unique setting profoundly moved patrons, as evidenced by one guest's reflection.

"I really needed to see what is this place! How it is possible that we have this kind place here – incredibly fine! It made me feel humble."

The deliberate arrangement of space, including the generous spacing of tables, the elegant presentation of utensils and menus, and the judicious use of lighting and natural elements, significantly enriched the guest experience.

"The atmosphere there was wonderfully peaceful. The old tiles, each of them looking slightly different, really fascinated me – I can still see them with my eyes!"

In the case of the Flora's Day Celebration, the design of the platform for interaction between the restaurant environment and its customers was uniquely executed across four distinct physical settings (see Table 1 for details). The experience of guided baking in the teaching kitchen necessitated direct engagement with the restaurant setting, involving the use of ready-made ingredients, rolling pins, aprons, countertops, ovens, tables, and chairs, thus "automatically" immersing guests in the restaurantscape. Similarly, the experiences of escapism (through participatory mini-plays) and aesthetics (via social dining) facilitated a sensory connection between the restaurant environment and the customers. This is illustrated by the following focus group comments.

"During the performance, I was just amazed by how well-finished everything was. All the details, carpets, costumes, buns, and punch perfectly captured the essence of the historical period."

"I just stared at those magnificent rows of differently colored tables. Goodness me, they were flaming in my eyes! I observed everything very carefully as I collected dishes on my plate. I even queried about the origin of those glass items."

Conversely, the entertainment experience (a variation of the Ready, Steady, Cook competition) was less effective at encouraging customers to fully engage with their surroundings. We construe that this multi-faceted approach to spatial design introduced a variety of interactions between the restaurant environment and its patrons, which in turn, markedly enhanced the overall value of the experience. However, it's important to recognize that such intricate designs for restaurant environments can lead to increased costs and present challenges for scalability.

In the Andante Festivo case, the interaction between the restaurant environment and customers mirrored the approach taken in the Festina Lente scenario. This entailed a considerable dedication of time and resources towards crafting and refining the overall layout, including table arrangements and settings, menu design, interior decorations, and the integration of lighting, scent, and soundscapes. Preliminary tests were also conducted as observed in this field note.

"We tested the interior decorations once before the actual event. We managed to borrow some items from local shops. The test revealed that we had to forego the idea of hanging mirrors on the walls."

Similar to the Festina Lente case, the designed restaurant environment was highly valued by the customers, as evidenced by on-site interviews:

"The sight of real candles burning, candelabums gracing the tables, exquisite table settings, and the dim lighting created a fine atmosphere in the dining room!"

"Entering the dining hall was magnificent, with the view opening splendidly. I could even see the sun setting, bathing the room in a glowing light, reminiscent of the Bay of Naples."

However, collaborating with an actual restaurant presented challenges in realizing the envisioned restaurantscape. All decisions required negotiation with the management, necessitating resolution of differing opinions. This led to delays and unsettling uncertainties as reflected in this field note.

"We noted that certain decisions could not be made due to the absence of inputs from earlier stages. We couldn't finalize the menu card as the confirmation of offered foods and wines was pending. ... The CEO approved our table setting plans but vetoed the idea of tall candelabums on the tables. I believed they were crucial for establishing a festive atmosphere. Eventually, I managed to persuade her."

4.2.2. Personnel-customer interaction as an enhancer of staged restaurant experience

We contend that a key factor contributing to the success of the staged restaurant experience was the high-quality interaction between the staff and customers. In the Festina Lente case, a head waiter was specifically designated to oversee customer interactions. A comprehensive script was developed to guide these interactions, dictating the phrases to be used and the tone of voice, a measure deemed necessary due to the inexperience of the staff, who were primarily students. Even the precise physical movements involved in serving were practiced. This meticulous preparation appeared to yield positive results, as the field note below shows.

"It seems to me that service is solid and peaceful, the faces look happy and a good atmosphere prevails among them. I get the feeling that everyone tries his/her best and remembers well what we agreed."

As a case in point, the coordinated welcoming ceremony appeared to

move many customers. Our field note recorded its impact.

“It clearly created a powerful and memorable experience. It could be seen from their spontaneous expressions and immediate comments.”

On the other hand, there were some drawbacks to adhering too closely to the script. This field note illustrates the potential negative service consequences.

“At times, the staff might have been overly rigid in following the script, neglecting to observe the customers’ expressions and behaviors that signal their needs and preferences.”

The contributions of mini-play actors and musicians to staging an engaging event should also be highlighted, as they significantly enhanced the interaction between staff and customers. This is reflected in the feedback received from the guests. We propose that these elements introduced here collectively underscore the importance of managing dynamic and attentive personnel-customer interactions in creating a memorable staged restaurant experience.

“The program you offered relaxed me further. It was filled with humor without being pretentious – a true hedonist’s delight.”

“Seeing live musicians perform was truly spectacular, a refreshing change from the usual piped-in music.”

In the context of the Flora’s Day Celebration, the interaction between the staff and customers presents a unique case. This uniqueness stems from the fact that the individuals orchestrating the staged restaurant experience and the guests hail from the same organization, a scenario seldomly encountered in standard business practice. The only exceptions were the writer and lead actor of the mini-play and the host of the Ready, Steady, Cook competition, who were professional outsiders. For some guests, the experience was enhanced by seeing their colleagues adopt unconventional roles, as highlighted in the focus group interviews.

“It was really nice to see my former colleagues in those roles.”

“Many of your staff members were involved. They embraced those roles with such passion – they became the characters they portrayed.”

However, this arrangement can lead to a tendency towards excessive commendation and muted criticism. This is illustrated by the comments from the focus groups. Overall, they suggest that while the internal participation enriched the experience for some, it also introduced a bias in the evaluation of the event.

“Already then I wondered how on earth you managed to pull all this off!”

“I came away with the impression that everything related to food and dining in your unit will be handled excellently and with finesse.”

“Perhaps the Ready, Steady, Cook show was a tad lengthy. It seemed to lose some of its appeal as it went on.”

In the case of Andante Festive, a comprehensive strategy was devised to optimize guest interactions at each point of the customer journey, drawing inspiration from the principle of Festina Lente. This strategy clearly defined the primary responsibilities of the porter, head waiter, servants, and presenter/singer, as well as the supporting roles of actors and musicians, detailing the timing and manner of the service delivery, as documented in the following field note.

“We explored various methods to infuse each service encounter with elements of surprise, delight, and engagement for our guests.”

However, the implementation revealed challenges, particularly with the composition of the service team, which included both student and professional waiters who did not integrate well. This division led to inconsistent interactions with customers and increased tension within

the team. The feedback after the event highlighted these issues, with professional waiters critiquing the service blueprint for its rigidity and the students for adhering too closely to it. Conversely, the student waiters felt let down by the professionals’ lack of early and serious involvement in the event planning and preparation. These internal conflicts partially surfaced in the guests’ experiences, as reflected in their feedback.

“It seemed as though the actors paid us more attention than the waiters did.”

“The evening began wonderfully, with attentive service. However, as the night progressed, we felt neglected.”

“The waiters appeared overwhelmed by the pressure of performing in a large room under the scrutiny of many guests. This was evident even among the professional staff.”

“It felt as though the waiters were merely following a script, absent and failing to attend to guests’ needs.”

Such inconsistencies in the staff-guest interactions underscore the challenge in managing the staged dining experiences. Recognizing these issues early and implementing preventive strategies, such as targeted training and internal marketing initiatives, are crucial for ensuring a high-quality service delivery.

4.2.3. Customer-customer interaction as an enhancer of staged restaurant experience

In our analysis, we emphasize that the dynamics and nature of interactions among customers themselves can significantly influence the effectiveness of the staged restaurant experience. Although these interactions fall outside direct managerial control, they can be subtly guided through carefully crafted staging designs and operational strategies. Central to this is the role of food in fostering interactions between customers. In the case of Andante Festive, exceptional care was taken to design a menu that resonates with the themes of slow food and celebrates local history and culture, featuring dishes such as: Whitefish-salmon tartare, Chanterelle soup with nettles-pesto bread, Black-currant sorbet, Tournedos steak with Madeira sauce, celery-potato puree, and Redcurrant crème Brûlée.

These culinary selections prompted lively discussions among guests as each new course was presented, further enhanced by the mini-play actors who introduced the upcoming menu item at the close of each act. This approach not only sparked immediate customer reactions, as the subsequent field note illustrates—“*Eyebrows were raised, happy looks appeared on the faces and conversation about the food commenced*”—but also led many guests to take the menu home as a memento. The next field note showcases how actors’ use of exaggerated local dialect and humour also played a key role in encouraging social interaction among guests seated at the same table.

“The exaggerated use of local dialect and saucy lines invoked gales of laughter and comments addressed to one who sat next to.”

Furthermore, our observations suggest that the socio-demographic and attitudinal similarity among customers served as a crucial facilitator for customer-to-customer interactions. This stresses the importance of targeted group identification and marketing in managerial decision-making, highlighting the intricate balance between the staged elements of the dining experience and the natural interactions that emerge among the guests.

In the context of the Flora’s Day Celebration, the predisposition for interaction among guests was notably high, largely because many attendees shared a common organizational background. This familiarity bred a sense of anticipation and shared expectations about the event, as conversations about the upcoming celebration circulated among colleagues prior to the event. The most engaging interactions occurred during activities that combined educational and aesthetic experiences,

such as guided baking sessions and communal dining. These events facilitated a rich exchange of thoughts among guests, as highlighted in our observations.

"During the guided baking of pies, conversations flourished around the correct form, size, and depth of the pies' crinkles. Later, at the dining table, debates emerged about what constitutes the perfect pie."

Additionally, the phase of the event that was staged to create entertaining experience, the 'Ready, Steady, Cook'-style competition, demonstrated that interactions among customers could extend beyond verbal communication, embracing shared physical and emotional reactions, as noted in our observation memos.

"The playfulness, fiddling and humor of the performance triggered loud bursts of laughter, making people to writhe on their seats, lowering their heads down and placing their hands on their mouths."

However, not all staged activities were received positively by all participants. A particular segment involving unconventional methods for preparing a layer cake—specifically the use of a battery drill and a hawk—crossed what some perceived as the boundary of acceptable culinary conduct. This departure from traditional norms evoked mixed, and in some cases negative, reactions, as evidenced by feedback from the focus group interviews.

"I have been taught that you should not play with food! When they started to use those tools on the food, it made me uncomfortable and resistant to the idea."

These observations underline the critical role of managerial judgment in curating content for staged experiences. It is essential to align the selected activities with the preferences and sensibilities of the target audience to ensure a positive and engaging experience for all attendees.

In the *Andante Festivo* case, the dynamics of customer interactions mirrored those observed in the *Festina Lente*, albeit with a more intentional approach to fostering and guiding these interactions. From the beginning, customers were acknowledged as pivotal co-contributors to the staged dining experience. The event's programming—encompassing mini-plays, the presenter's interjections, and musical performances—was thoughtfully designed to not only captivate and involve the guests but also to afford them opportunities for unhindered conversation. This strategy is encapsulated in our field observations.

"The program actively engaged guests through direct interaction from the actors and presenter. However, it was equally crucial to provide moments for guests to engage with one another, a vital component of the experiential offering. Our goal was not to incessantly interrupt their conversations with our scheduled events."

The post-event feedback from the guests corroborated the effectiveness of this approach. Thus, we can identify a key principle in managing staged dining experiences: the deliberate structuring and timing of opportunities for guest interaction significantly enhance the likelihood of delivering a memorable and engaging experience.

"The actors' subtle gestures, winks, and inquiries kept us thoroughly engaged."

"Whenever the background music filled the room, a lively buzz of conversations could be heard from every table. Yet, as soon as the performance recommenced, a collective attentiveness returned among the audience."

5. Theoretical contribution, implications and conclusions

Our review of existing literature reveals a comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate the creation and co-creation of

experience value, yet there remains a gap in knowledge regarding the effective management of staging engaging restaurant experiences. Motivated by this gap, we embarked on this research project with the objective of developing a model for the service management processes specifically tailored to the restaurant industry, focusing particularly on the translation of the staging of experience approach into practical applications. As we conclude this research journey, we consolidate our findings and introduce an innovative service management model designed to enhance the staging of engaging restaurant experiences.

The initial framework depicted in Fig. 1 served as our theoretical base, enriched and refined through empirical data gathered from three distinct cases. This approach allowed us to iteratively build and refine our conceptual understanding, eventually taking the shape of a new model.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

We contribute to the service management literature by proposing that successful staging of engaging restaurant experiences hinges on the ability to master the staging functions of leadership, artistic performance delivery, and insight creation, and the organizational support practices of service employee empowerment, service process blueprinting, and customer involvement (Fig. 2).

Management of staging as leadership, centers on the allocation of resources, the distribution of roles, and the orchestration of interactions – crystallizing as the organizational mindset for customer experience creation (Bonfanti et al., 2023). This involves both the shared and backstage environments (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987; Kandampully et al., 2023), as well as the interactions between service employees and guests, and among the patrons themselves (Hanks and Line, 2018). Our findings highlight the negative impact of desynchronized processes between backstage and shared stages on guest satisfaction – echoing Taheri et al. (2020) results. Extensive research into service management processes underscores the importance of appointing one or more individuals who possess a blend of business skills, interpersonal capabilities, and self-management competencies (Testa and Sipe, 2012; Shum et al., 2018). These individuals are tasked with the critical role of orchestrating these processes, a notion that is supported by the evidence presented in our study.

Management of staging as artistic performance delivery revolves around the design of service-, restaurant- and experiencescape (Bitner, 1982; Kandampully et al., 2023; Mossberg and Johansen, 2006). The shared stage enabling the collaborative value co-creation, aligning with Grönroos and Voima's (2013) concept of joint sphere of customer and provider interactions, lies at its heart. This approach underscores the necessity of a comprehensive management strategy that integrates and coordinates various elements that previous studies (Gustafsson, 2004; Edwards and Gustafsson, 2008; Ala-Harju et al., 2019; Purnomo and Raty, 2023) have pinpointed as crucial to enriching the dining experience. The empirical evidence presented in this research corroborates Mossberg and Eide's (2017) assertions regarding the pivotal role of a cohesive narrative or theme in the staging of restaurant experience. According to Williams et al. (2020), authentic and thus compelling story-telling themes can originate from craft, innovation, myth, celebrity, provenance and collectability. Such narratives can draw inspiration from a myriad of sources including cultural contexts, current trends, operational practices, and importantly, customer feedback (Rahimian et al., 2021; Bonfanti et al., 2023). Effective staging of engaging restaurant experiences requires practical operationalization of story narratives through methodologies such as process and customer journey mapping or service blueprinting (Sampson, 2012; Lim et al., 2019). Additionally, a captivating experience that engages customers through multi-sensory stimulation and emotional engagement requires careful planning of the restaurant aesthetics and interactions at various customer touchpoints, as highlighted by Carú and Cova (2007) and Horng and Hsu (2021).

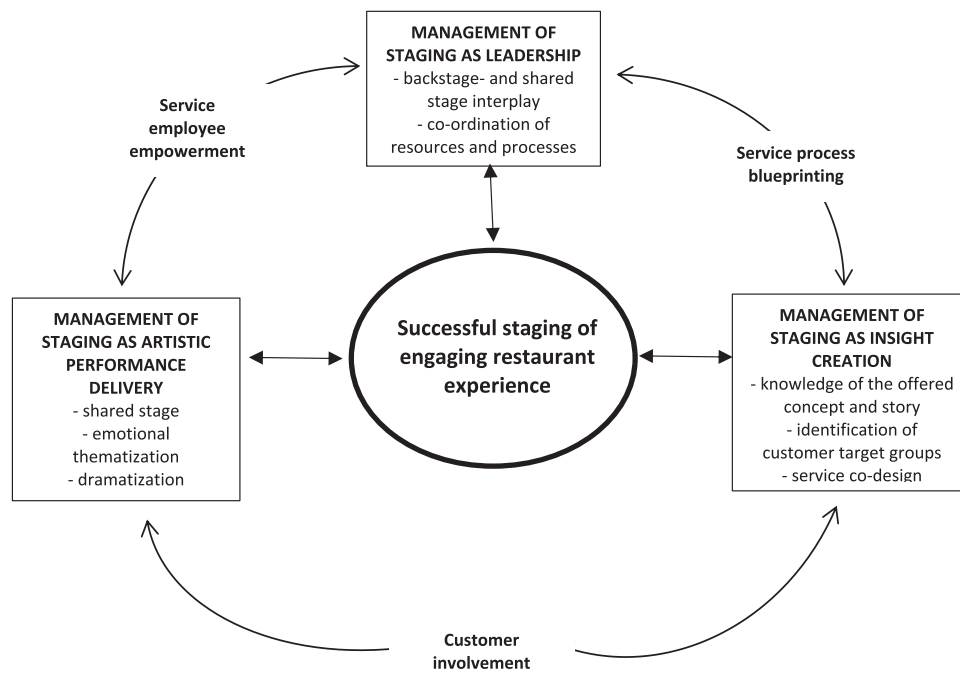


Fig. 2. Service management process model for staging engaging restaurant experiences.

Management of staging as insight creation focuses on how nuanced restaurant customer experiences can be facilitated through various co-creation processes effectively (Im et al., 2021). It involves continuously monitoring and quickly adjusting to perceived experiences of customers. Much of the existing research in the realm of restaurant customer insight has pinpointed various factors and dimensions that influence customer satisfaction and subsequent behaviors such as loyalty, with a particular emphasis on the quality of service in restaurants (Tanford, 2016; Ladeira et al., 2016). The importance of meticulously planning and developing the service narrative, conceptualizing the service, designing the servicescape, and blueprinting these elements based on customer insights is well established in literature (see e.g. Kandampully et al., 2023; Bonfanti et al., 2023) and further corroborated by the findings of this study. Our results also suggest that an essential part of management of staging as insight creation is the identification and profiling of key target customer groups. The information concerning their characteristics needs, expectations and values should guide the decision-making during the whole process of staging management. Rahimian et al. (2021) study supports the usefulness of this managerial exercise, especially as currently the potential of guest typification has been overlooked in hospitality research (Nanu et al., 2024).

Our model proposes that the development of **organizational support practices** can help in connecting different staging management functions together. The practice of service employee empowerment supports both the leadership and artistic performance delivery staging management functions; the practice of service process blueprinting supports the leadership and insight creation functions; and the practice consumer involvement supports the insight creation and artistic performance delivery functions. Table 2 illustrates in more detail how different organizational practices can support the three staging management functions. Table 2 also lists recent studies that on the one hand corroborate our findings and on the other hand offer potential for deepening the understanding of the organizational practices – managerial functions interrelationships.

Service employee empowerment as an organizational support practice is deemed important; supporting previous studies highlighting the central role employees play in facilitating experiential co-creation processes - often culminating in the frontstage interaction with

customers for enhanced engagement (Rachão et al., 2021). The effects of being able to make up-front decisions was recognized as important in many service provider – patron interactions, findings in line with the results presented by Eren et al. (2021). Personnel training such as actor and narrative construction lessons represent one major empowerment source – it assists employees to better communicate and interact with customers and, accordingly, create appealing and memorable experiences (Bonfanti et al., 2023). For telling the story and artistic delivery the employees have to be empowered to take action, play the role and improvise when necessary (Mossberg and Eide, 2017).

Service process blueprinting is a detailed service plan portraying touchpoints and activities linking the backstage to shared front stage processes, and the service provider – patron interaction on a timeline (Dewi et al., 2022). This practice supports the leadership staging management function by guiding the staffing and other resource allocation decision-making. The successful implementation of a complex service blueprint to stage engaging restaurant experience can require extraordinary investment in the number and quality of servicepeople. According to Sorensen et al. (2020), the role of employees can be particularly crucial in creating value for the customers of themed attraction restaurant. On the other hand, this practice takes inputs from the insight creation function so that the service blueprint can be designed to meet the characteristics, desires and values of key customer groups; reminding of the importance of customer-centred understanding (Yu and Sangiorgi, 2018).

The **customer involvement** practice in our model refers to making customers part of restaurant experience and to harness it to support the insight creation and artistic performance delivery staging management functions. To illustrate, enhanced guest involvement became evident in our cases when they were exposed to extraordinary staging details such as matching dress code of the waitresses, music or mini plays or spontaneously immersed themselves in interacting with other customers. In-depth understanding of customer involvement episodes can inspire both the artistic performance delivery and insight creation management teams to innovate new persuasive staging offerings. According to Yu, and Sangiorgi (2018), organizations should continuously develop its user-centric innovation capabilities and processes. In fact, the most involved customers could be invited to co-ideate new experiential

Table 2
Specifying how organizational practices can support staging management functions.

Organizational practices supporting staging management functions	Description of underlying rationale	Additional insightful studies
1) Service employee empowerment - Leadership - Artistic performance delivery	- Empowered employees... + Display psychological capital, work engagement, service excellence and co-creative value + Contribute to co-creation of emotional and dramaturgical restaurant experience	- Chen and Peng (2021) - McCartney and Yoke (2024)
2) Service process blueprinting - Leadership - Insight creation	- Detailed service process blueprinting and customer touchpoint analysis + Help resource allocation decision-making pertaining to personnel, physical facilities and technological solutions + Inspire conception of novel service ideas and facilitate co-creation of tailored restaurant experiences	- Pandey and Kulshrestha (2021) - Kim and So (2024)
3) Customer involvement - Insight creation - Artistic performance delivery	- Making customers a part of staged restaurant experience... + Unleashes potential to capture content for story-telling, concept co-design and marketing communication + Activates willingness to participate in co-production of spectacle and act as a cultural brand ambassador	- Bachouche et al. (2024) - Lv et al. (2024)

services, thematic concepts and storylines applicable for staging ([Sakellariou et al., 2020](#)).

Our findings highlight the crucial role of the manager in overseeing the entire process to successfully create engaging restaurant experiences. This manager with his/her team is tasked to orchestrate various actors, activities, and resources effectively and in a timely manner. The interplay of the staging functions and the support practices plays a crucial role in bridging the processes between the shared and backstage processes and in facilitating and encouraging actor engagement influenced by the specific configurations of the restaurant. This highlights the staging managers' essential function in ensuring seamless integration and dynamic interaction across all facets of the service delivery process.

Our service management model for staging engaging restaurant experiences is to be further substantiated and elaborated in future studies. Here, we offer nine mid-range theories that can be employed to dig deeper into the relationships between different staging management functions and organizational support practices (see [Table 3](#)). We do not claim that this list is exhaustive but illustrative.

The Transformative Leadership Theory, Situational Leadership Theory, and Servant Leadership Theory elucidate methods for creating a customer service-oriented culture alongside a trusting and empowering organizational environment. In turn, the Empowerment Theory, Total Quality Management Theory, and Service-Dominant Logic Theory

Table 3
Mid-range theories to substantiate the proposed model.

Staging management functions	Staging management support practices		
	Service employee empowerment	Service process blueprinting	Customer involvement
Leadership	<i>Transformative Leadership Theory</i>	<i>Situational Leadership Theory</i>	<i>Servant Leadership Theory</i>
Artistic performance delivery	<i>Empowerment Theory</i>	<i>Total Quality Management Theory</i>	<i>Service Dominant Logic Theory</i>
Insight creation	<i>Social Exchange Theory</i>	<i>Activity Theory</i>	<i>Uses and Gratifications Theory</i>

provide insights into co-creation, the sharing of responsibilities, and the significance of continuous improvement. Finally, the Social Exchange Theory, Activity Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory delve into the dynamics of actor interactions and external factors that influence the staging of restaurant experiences, providing deeper insights into customer engagement.

Based on our research, we claim that to fully understand the pre-conditions of successful management of staging engaging restaurant experiences requires utilization of two levels of theories. The first level is our novel overarching model that links staging management functions to organizational support practices. The second level consists of more focused mid-range theories. Conceptually integrating our model with these theories, The Situational Leadership Theory, for example, highlights the importance of aligning staff skills and competencies with touchpoints and tasks in the service processes, and adapting the leadership styles accordingly ([Ghazzawi et al., 2017](#)). This approach ensures that the leadership staging management function is effectively applied to the service process (guided by the blueprinting support practice), enhancing overall performance and customer satisfaction. The Total Quality Management Theory introduces the notion of continuous improvements based on feedback, which can be instant and rewarding if restaurant embraces a cultural mindset of open guest - staff social interactions ([Jasti et al., 2022](#)), and, in line with the Activity Theory, also recognizes the significance of the individual - environment interactions ([Engström et al., 2003](#)). As this illustration shows, these theories hold promise in providing conceptual tools for further research concerning how and why the service blueprinting practice affects the capacity of the artistic performance delivery and insight creation staging management functions.

5.2. Managerial implications

For restaurant executives, we offer the following key recommendations to enhance the staging management of engaging restaurant experiences. Our model calls for stringent implementation of three main functions: a) Management of staging as leadership, b) Management of staging as artistic performance delivery, and c) Management of staging as insight creation. We posit that the execution of these functions should follow a structured and iterative approach. The support practices of high-quality service blueprinting, inventive customer involvement and skilful empowering of service employees are fundamental in facilitating the management of staging engaging restaurant experiences.

a) **Management of Staging as Leadership** focuses on resource coordination affecting the level of control, flexibility, training, and trust disposable for staging the restaurant experience. Effective control, especially concerning the timing of service encounters specified by the blueprint, is vital for enhancing the staged restaurant experience. Identifying the key moments such as guest arrival, order taking, food delivery, billing, and departure is essential. Ensuring seamless coordination between the backstage and shared stage operations is critical as

well. This requires practicing and by tuning of the teamwork. The flexibility in accommodating customer needs, like dietary and mobility restrictions is also important. Training employees to perform their roles effectively, especially when they are assumed to take roles as a part of a thematic narrative, is crucial. Lastly, building trust in the frontline staff to manage customer interactions and make on-the-spot adjustments is necessary for maintaining the quality of the staged experience as it evolves.

b) Management of Staging as Artistic Performance Delivery: This function seeks to guarantee the persuasiveness and significance of the physical setting, interactions, meal quality, ambiance, and overall management in staging an engaging dining experience. These factors play a crucial role in shaping customer experiences and emotions, particularly through memorable moments shared between the service provider and the customer. A managerial challenge lies in involving customers with the storyline used in staging the experience, underscoring the need for deep understanding of target market preferences, trends, and available resources. Since the story will be enacted and brought to life by the employees, its success depends significantly on their engagement. We recommend that the decision-making process for it is conceived by harnessing their input and involvement.

c) Management of Staging as Insight Creation: Insight creation is about learning continuously of and from customers. A successful dining experience begins with a well-conceived storyline that guides the integration of food, service, and ambiance. We advice restaurant managers to establish platforms where customers can take part in co-creating new experience concepts, event narratives and play plots. Moreover, we urge restaurateurs to consider the possibilities offered by the gamification principles and technologies such as virtual reality and robotics to augment and diversify the staged experience. Finally, we suggest that customers are empowered to give their feedback about the staged experience they participated easily and quickly and that their desires, opinions, interests and lifestyle preferences are monitored and analysed regularly and carefully.

In conclusion, managing the staging of engaging restaurant experiences is a multifaceted process that requires paying simultaneously attention to the leadership, artistic performance delivery and insight creation functions. By systematically, creatively and ever-improvingly executing their restaurant managers can effectively stage engaging and memorable dining experiences that meet and exceed customer expectations.

5.3. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Our research and model presented in Fig. 2 recognize how management of staging restaurant experiences is a dynamic stepwise process (Wang et al., 2016) encompassing integration of tangible and intangible resources (Park and Jang, 2021) into the service design. We add new knowledge to this discourse by exploring the relationships between the managerial functions and support practices needed to stage engaging restaurant experiences.

We acknowledge the limitations of our investigation. Our literature review was intentionally concise and selective, aligning with theory-building research conventions. As a consequence, our goal was to first approach the empirical phase equipped with a conceptual preunderstanding of restaurant experience staging management and later extract from our findings to refine it. We recognize that drawing conclusions from three cases can be suboptimal given the vast diversity of restaurant types and the variability in management practices. On the other hand, our cases provided exceptionally rich and thick primary data and our novel model shows conceptual similarities with relevant pre-existing approaches (Hsiao and Yang, 2010; Bonfanti et al., 2023; Rahimian et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2016). In an attempt to further substantiate its effectiveness and meaningfulness, in Table 4, we showcase how our key conceptual relations converge with the theoretical ideas and processual phases put forth by these related approaches.

Table 4

Conceptual cross-validation of proposed model with related customer and service experience management frameworks.

Conceptual relations proposed by the model	Hsiao and Yang (2010)	Rahimian et al. (2021)	Bonfanti et al. (2023)
1) Management of staging as leadership ↔ service process blueprinting	Service design	Customer experience design	Touchpoint journey
2) Service process blueprinting ↔ management of staging as insight creation	Consumer demand	Customer identification	Customer's experiential needs
3) Management of staging as insight creation ↔ customer involvement	Service experience insights	Customer experience monitoring	Customer listening strategy
4) Management of staging as leadership ↔ service employee empowerment		Customer experience implementation, Delivering Services	
5) Service employee empowerment ↔ management of staging as artistic performance delivery	Service quality Demo Kit development		Customer intrigue strategy
6) Management of staging as artistic performance delivery ↔ customer involvement	Prototyping	Customer experience implementation, Interaction and Co-creation with customers	Customer engagement strategy Customer experiential immersion strategy

Service process blueprinting with touchpoints (Bonfanti et al., 2023) as a management tool for service (Hsiao and Yang, 2010) and customer experience design (Rahimian et al., 2021) was in our study also of relevance for staging engaging restaurant experiences (see Relation 1 in Table 4). The identification of customers (Rahimian et al., 2021), their needs (Bonfanti et al., 2023) and demand trends (Hsiao and Yang, 2010) pertains to our “insight creation” (Se Relation 2 in Table 4) that serves to produce a better understanding of how to involve customers in the process of staging engaging restaurant experiences (see Relation 3 in Table 4). Our findings echo the importance of observing and monitoring (Rahimian et al., 2021) real experiences (Hsiao and Yang, 2010) for learning and creating insights (Bonfanti et al., 2023). In the process of service delivery (Rahimian et al., 2021) (see Relation 4 in Table 4), especially during the phases of customer – employee, and backstage – and shared stage interactions, management of staging as leadership concerns service employee empowerment, a precursor to service quality (Hsiao and Yang, 2010) and the possibility to offer customers “unexpected and surprising services” (Bonfanti et al., 2023, p. 7) (see Relation 5 in Table 4). This, however, hinges on the successful implementation (Rahimian et al., 2021) of elaborated experiential immersion strategies (Bonfanti et al., 2023), including customer involvement. With reference to the approach of Hsiao and Yang (2010), and the dynamic characteristics of services such as continuous learning and improvements, this can be considered as a kind of “prototyping” (see Relation 6 in Table 4).

The extent of conceptual overlaps indicates that our new model passes at least this initial validity test. In any case, we naturally invite further research to critically evaluate, refine, and expand upon our theoretical framework.

Future research, guided by the process, functions and organizational support practice identified in our study, could significantly advance our understanding of experience staging management. Investigating the nuanced micro-processes that breathe life into a thematic story could

provide deeper insights into effective service blueprinting (Bonfanti et al., 2023), thereby enriching our perspective on the management of staging engaging restaurant experiences. Finally, we recognize the growing importance of digitalization (Akhmedova, 2024) and robotization (Jang and Lee, 2020) for the service industry and hospitality sector and notice that the question how new technologies challenge and change existing models for guest experience management needs more scholarly attention (Youssofi et al., 2024). In the light of our developed service management process model for staging engaging restaurant experiences, we welcome, as one avenue for future studies, more research on the management of human-robot interactions, for example what kind of roles service robots can take and how their behaviors is perceived by employees and customers (Moriuchi and Murdy, 2024; Collins, 2020; Mejia et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2023). How new technologies transform and support the identified staging management functions and support practices are still to be explored.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Harri Luomala: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tuija Pitkääkoski:** Methodology, Data curation. **Peter Björk:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. The descriptions of the staging solutions of the restaurant experience concepts

Festina Lente

In the connection of well-established food fair, that is organized at time of harvesting (late summer – early fall), a pop-up restaurant was created in the cellar of old and prestigious local building. The food fair guests that mainly come from the home province, but also from other parts of the country, served as our key target group. Using the themes of slow food (*Festina Lente* means ‘rush slowly’) and distinct well-known local history, the cellar was transformed into a restaurant with 36 seats for guests (2 settings were served during the evening). The core product was a 5-course dinner tailored to match the themes and served at tables. Dining was accompanied by live band playing classical and folk music of composers originating from the region. Waitresses were instructed to talk local dialect when they interacted with customers – they also wore artefacts imbued with meanings anchored in local history in their accessories. Otherwise, they were trained to respect the gist of slow food dining in all of their actions. A humorous sketch portraying a local farmer couple (actors used strong local dialect) visiting a fine restaurant for the first time was performed as 5-minute mini-shows during the evening. Meticulous attention was devoted to designing the audio-visual dining ambience (decorations, lighting – use of both candles and spots, artefacts, music, use of natural materials such as leafy twigs of currants and rowan berries).

Flora's day celebration

Each of the Flora's Day Celebration guest serially participated in all of these events during one evening. The first event was meant to represent an educational staging of restaurant experience. It occurred in the teaching kitchens of the school and involved a guided baking of famous national pastries from lecturing, dough-rolling, filling in them, trying to shape them properly, baking and tasting them while still

extremely fresh. The second event was purported to stand for an escapist staging of restaurant experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). It was a mini-play directed by a theatre professional – he was also one of the actors (others were amateurs). Some of the guest were “snatched” to become actors themselves as the dramatic plot changed; the rest of the guests took the role of crowd. This performance was held in a regular classroom that was staged as a coffee party hall of early 1900-century countryside mansion. The staging of an entertaining restaurant experience was approached in the third event. In effect, it consisted of modified version of the Ready, Steady, Cook-competition TV-format. This parodic and pre-scripted show presented how a muscular janitor and a philosophy teacher compete against each other in trying to make a coconut milk-cocktail and a cream cake out of the ingredients found on the tables – the former using cordless drill and the latter power of thought. Guests sat in the auditorium and followed the action on the stage either as live or through a screen installed on one of the walls. The fourth event was designed to mimic an aesthetic staging of restaurant experience. Quite simply, its essential content rose from a luxurious buffet dinner being offered to the guest at the end of the evening. Extreme care was devoted to create a unique, harmonious and impressive multi-sensory dining experience, for instance, through the rhythmic use colors in dining hall buffet tables, and in offered foods. Many sources of multi-modal stimulation such as sounds from a mini-fountain, visual effects from spotlights and gustatory-olfactory sensations from eating flowers as a part of salad enchanted the guests.

Andante festivo

Once more, the slow food-ideology impregnated the staging of this restaurant experience – this time Italian food culture served as the well of inspiration as far as its major substance is concerned. The 5-course dinner with accompanying wines (service at tables) formed the heart of this restaurant experience staging exercise. The ambience was Italianized by the menu (e.g. focaccia, herbed chicken saltimbocca), classical artefacts (e.g. statues, pots, iron gates with garlands), waitresses' accessories (e.g. flowers in hair) and behaviors (e.g. use of a few Italian words), live music (e.g. evergreen ‘Guarda che luna’) and hostess' information bulletins as regards the Italian culture and food. As this experience staging occurred during fall, candles, mirrors, spotlights and the starry night-effect in the ceilings powerfully shaped the atmosphere too. A plotted mini play (7 actors) was written to improve the cohesiveness of the evening. It was a multi-act story about a fictional Italian family restaurant Giorgio Grande. Its procession was coordinated with the unfolding of the dinner, including foods and drinks served to the guests.

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