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**Themed Restaurant Experiences of Turkish Tourists: The Case of Lviv (Ukraine)\*†**

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**Abstract**

*As an integral part of the tourism industry, food and beverage establishments play critical roles in tourism destinations. Especially in recent years, the increasing importance of experiential product presentations in touristic places has encouraged the emergence of businesses that produce different food and beverage concepts to meet tourists' expectations. One of these business types is themed restaurants. This study aims to determine the experiences of Turkish tourists served in themed restaurants running in the city of Lviv, Ukraine. For this purpose, e-reviews and participant observation notes were used as data sources. The study findings have revealed five themes that shape the memorable experiences of tourists visiting themed restaurants: atmosphere, entertainment, staff, emotions, and senses. In themed restaurants, while tourists have been observed to have positive behavioral intentions, such as revisiting, recommending, and paying much more, some negative factors negatively affecting their experience have been identified in these restaurants. In the conclusion part of the research, suggestions for theory and practice have been developed.*

**Keywords:** Theme restaurants, tourist experience, Turkish tourist, restaurant experience, Ukraine

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## 1. Introduction

Today's rapidly changing economic environment and emerging consumption habits lead more and more customers to experiential consumption styles (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Innovative applications show an increase in the food and beverage industry to meet this demand. One of these innovative applications is theme restaurants. Sørensen and Jensen (2015) have stated that the general purpose of tourist demands is to have an enjoyable experience. Today, restaurant customers and tourists visit to restaurant establishments not only for delicious food but also for excellent service and a pleasant atmosphere (Heung, 2002; Heung & Gu, 2012). In this context, theme restaurants are places designed not only to provide a delicious dining experience to their customers but also to provide an enjoyable experience (Weiss et al., 2004). In addition to food, these restaurants generally offer richer experiences in terms of space design, atmosphere, and service compared to other typical restaurants (Yan & Felicen, 2021). Heung (2002) emphasizes that customers who visit theme restaurants enjoy the environment as well as the food.

The literature covers many studies on different topics related to theme restaurants. Some of these topics are as follows: factors affecting the choice of themed restaurant (Heung, 2002), the effects of food quality, service quality, atmosphere, and innovation variables in theme restaurants on customers' revisit intention (Weiss et al., 2004), the influential factors on customers in theme restaurants (Hsu et al., 2009) and the effect of authentic dining experiences in theme restaurants on customer satisfaction (Tsai & Lu, 2012). In the studies of recent years, while Meng and Choi (2017) have investigated the role of servicescape, customer emotion, satisfaction, and perceived authenticity in the process of creating life quality for theme restaurant customers; Meng and Choi (2018) have examined the decision-making process of theme restaurant customers within the framework of planned behavior theory; Sørensen et al. (2020) have explored the complexity of creating experience value in complex tourism environments; Ishak et al. (2021) have identified internal issues in the management of theme restaurants rather than the external challenges of commercial operations; Yan and Felicen (2021) have evaluated the quality of venue and servicescape from customers' experiences with theme restaurants. In the studies in Turkey, while Akkuş (2019) has documented the relationship between consumers' perception of the restaurant atmosphere and social media shares in the sample of theme restaurants, and Bekar and Gümüş Dönmez (2014) have focused on the distinction between theme restaurants and theme ethnic restaurants. Although there are many studies on theme restaurants, no exploratory study has been found on the consumer experiences served by theme restaurants.

The primary purpose of this study is to determine the themes that shape the memorable experiences of Turkish tourists served in theme restaurants. The Ukrainian city of Lviv has been chosen as the study area, especially since it is one of the most visited destinations by Turkish tourists in recent years and has too many theme restaurants. The study findings will possibly contribute to both theories and practice about the theme restaurant business and offer some innovative ideas, especially for entrepreneurs considering operating a theme restaurant.

## 2. Theme Restaurants

Approximately 257 years have passed since Boulanger opened the first restaurant (Ferguson, 1998) in Paris in 1765, and he set an example for many entrepreneurs for modern restaurant management. Since then, the restaurant business has grown enormously and become one of the most significant sectors of today. Especially after the Second World War, the acceleration of tourism movements sped up the growth of the food and beverage sector. In addition, the increasing competition among food and beverage businesses and changing customer demands have also affected the emergence of restaurants with original concepts. One of these specific restaurant concepts is theme restaurants. Restaurant entrepreneurs (especially in the USA) who are aware of the changes in the food and beverage sector, the differences in consumption trends, and innovations in this direction, especially after the Second World War, have made theme food and beverage management initiatives in different concepts.

Theme restaurants stage their cooking experience to attract more customers. Their unique concept and decor encourage their customers to explore new food experiences and make them a popular choice in the market (Ishak et al., 2021). Theme restaurants are defined as concept restaurants designed in a specific atmosphere with a distinctive building, musical style, and personality (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Hsu & Powers, 2002). Becker (1987) describes the main characteristics of theme restaurants as “a dominant, easily identifiable theme,” “a fixed menu in line with the theme,” “entertainment in line with the theme,” and “building architecture and interior design in harmony with the theme.” Besides, it is stated that choosing an attractive theme is significant for theme restaurants, but a perfect presentation is even more essential for success.

Theme restaurants are generally preferred because of physical and psychological factors, such as thematic fantasy, environmental perception, service quality, accessibility, and satisfaction with food (Hsu et al. 2009). Many theme restaurant entrepreneurs try to create a new cultural environment by adopting a specific theme to remain competitive in the market and thus gain more loyal customers (Meng & Choi, 2017). Aiming to reflect to the client a specific atmosphere with environment, service, food, and staff holistically, these types of restaurants usually present themes such as a period (e.g., the middle ages, the second world war), an object (e.g., oil lamps, photo frames, old household items, toys), a concept (e.g., the avant-garde, masochism, sadism), supernatural beliefs (e.g., witches, vampires, werewolves), a film (e.g., Harry Potter, the Lord of the Rings) or a venue (e.g., a hospital, a prison).

Themed restaurants can offer different unique experiences than regular restaurants. In other words, standard restaurants use taste and price to attract customers, while theme restaurants use a unique dining experience with a different theme as a selling strategy to attract customers' attention effectively (Yan & Felicen, 2021). Besides traditional restaurants, there are diverse restaurant concepts such as ethnic restaurants, green restaurants, and technological restaurants. Theme restaurants should not be confused with such restaurants. In this regard, Bekar and Gümüş Dönmez (2014) have noted that theme restaurants and ethnic restaurants can be confused, and these terms even can be used interchangeably. The authors have suggested that while theme restaurants bring the atmosphere to the forefront rather than the food and drinks, ethnic restaurants push the culinary culture and culturally specific dishes and beverages to the fore. Wood and Munoz (2007) claim that theme restaurants offer an exaggerated and artificial experience through subjects with no specific limits, while ethnic restaurants can establish a connection to cultural heritage or provide rich experiences with ethnic culinary culture. As a result, theme restaurants are becoming more prominent with the increasing competition in the food and beverage sector, the rapid development of the tourism sector, and the number of tourists and restaurant customers who desire memorable experiences.

### **2.1. Tourist experience at theme restaurants**

The experience concept, and in particular the tourist experience concept, has become a substantial topic for recent tourism research. In 1998, in their article “Welcome to Experience Economy,” published in the Harvard Business Review, Pine and Gilmore claimed that “experiences” replaced “services,” and they drew more attention to the subject of experience. The “experience economy” has a rich application area, showing its effect in many sectors day by day, especially in the tourism sector. According to Richards (2012), the tourism sector is a large part of the modern experience economy, where gastronomic values play a significant role. In this context, theme restaurants are one of the most outstanding gastronomic venues of the destinations. Indeed, some researchers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tsai & Lu, 2012; Yan & Felicen, 2021) agree that theme restaurants offer rich experiences within the experience economy.

Experiencing is the usage of all senses and embodied habitus (internalized tendencies) (Sørensen et al., 2020). Experience can be defined as observational and (or) spatial participation in an event. Tourist experience, on the other hand, is a set of physical, emotional, sensory, spiritual, and (or) intellectual impressions of tourists before, during, and after travel (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The tourist experience is closely related to the individual perception of tourism activities and products (Wei et

al., 2019). Furthermore, “memorable tourism experiences” is another concept related to tourist experiences. Yu et al. (2021) draw attention to the necessity of discovering memorable experiences to examine tourist post-travel experiences. The authors have suggested that people can only remember particular experiences which are of critical importance to them. In this context, Kim (2010) defines a memorable touristic experience as “an experience positively recalled after the event has occurred.” While the tourist experience is a subjective mental state that tourists feel during their travel, the memorable tourist experience is another subjective mental state that has distinctive features from other ordinary experiences remembered after the trip (Yu et al., 2021). Many academic studies on tourist and customer experience have been done and continue to be done. In particular, some authors have divided experiences into various areas and dimensions and laid the foundation for many experience-related studies. Table 1 summarizes the suggested experience areas.

**Table 1.** Classifications of experience areas

Fields of experience	Author/s and year
<b>Flow experience:</b> An individual’s feeling that time passes more differently than usual.	Csikszentmihalyi, 1990
<b>Entertainment:</b> Experiences that people passively assimilate through their senses.	Pine & Gilmore, 1999
<b>Education:</b> It is the experience in which people participate mentally and (or) physically to increase their knowledge and (or) skills.	
<b>Esthetics:</b> Experiences related to enjoying creations.	
<b>Escape:</b> Experiences of doing something different.	Schmitt, 1999
<b>Sensory:</b> Experiences of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.	
<b>Affective:</b> It is the emotions and mood of the customer in the areas where he receives service.	
<b>Cognitive:</b> Staying in the mind by arousing curiosity and excitement.	
<b>Behaviors:</b> Experiences based on physical abilities.	
<b>Relational:</b> The experiences of individuals about their social environment.	Aho, 2001
<b>Emotional:</b> Some emotional impressions that are felt and recorded.	
<b>Informative:</b> It is a new intellectual impression or learning.	
<b>Practical:</b> Experiences like tennis or mountaineering skills that are practical.	
<b>Transformational:</b> Experiences of bodily and mental changes.	Dube & Le Bel, 2003
<b>Sensory:</b> Experiences such as seeing, smelling, hearing, touching, tasting.	
<b>Emotional:</b> Experiences such as sadness, excitement, and fear.	
<b>Social:</b> Experiences that emerge as a result of interaction with the social environment.	
<b>Mental:</b> Experiences that can invigorate and engage the mind.	

Basic studies of experience are, of course, not limited to Table 1. The above experiences have been especially emphasized because of their recognition in many areas. Different authors have carried out many studies on the restaurant experience. According to Jeong and Jang (2011), the experience of customers served in restaurants is their knowledge and (or) observations gained from entering the restaurant until leaving. According to the authors, customers’ positive and negative restaurant experiences are shaped by their subjective judgments about current and previous experiences. The relevant literature review has shown no specific study on the theme restaurant experience. The literature has emphasized the necessity of authenticity in theme restaurant businesses for a better consumer experience (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Tsai & Lu, 2012; Meng & Choi, 2018). The authors have found that authenticity is a significant variable influencing customers’ revisit intention in theme restaurants. Yan and Felicen (2021) have underlined that theme restaurants offer customers a genuinely special theme experience compared to other restaurants. Tsai and Lu (2012) have pointed out that dining in theme restaurants is an experiential consumption. As a result, theme restaurants, as preferred food and beverage businesses in recent years, provide rich experiences to their customers, especially tourists who want to have memorable experiences.

### 3. Methodology

In order to meet the changing demands and expectations of tourists, creative and different tourism products are developed in destinations. Especially in recent years, people’s desire to make their dining

experiences memorable has encouraged food and beverage businesses to generate innovative and different products and services in this direction. The city of Lviv (Ukraine) is also a prominent tourism destination that attracts the attention of tourists with its theme restaurants. Lviv, which attracts the attention of domestic and foreign tourists, is among the favorite destinations visited by Turkish tourists (Ukrhaber, 2021). In this context, the current study has chosen the research area as the city of Lviv, which has many successful theme restaurants and thus plays a significant role in Ukrainian tourism. This study has examined these theme restaurants in Ukraine, which stand out both in online customer reviews (see Tripadvisor, 2021) and international tour sales sites (see Expedia, 2021), and determined their outstanding features. Thus, it has been aimed to provide knowledge that will contribute to the entrepreneurs who want to start in theme restaurant management. It is thought that this study observing and experiencing theme restaurants on-site will make significant contributions to the field both theoretically and practically.

The current study has adopted the qualitative research method as the most appropriate method for the research. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016) have explained that qualitative research uses qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview, and document analysis separately or together and follows an exploratory process to reveal perceptions and events in a natural environment realistically and holistically. Interviews, discussions, online sharing (such as texts, photographs), and participant observations are the main inductive techniques for investigating the tourist experience (Hycner, 1985; Ryan, 2010). The Ethics Committee Approval of this study has been taken from Gumushane University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee with the date 9/12/2021 and number of 2021/8.

### **3.1. Data collection and analysis**

The study used participant observations and online customer comments for data collection. Participant observations were carried out between 2-10 September 2021. Online reviews of themed restaurants reviewed on Tripadvisor include reviews from February 2015 to October 2021. Observation aims to learn something in detail about the behavior or event occurring in any environment. Considering that science and progress begin with observation, watching what people do can make it possible to reach more accurate information instead of asking about their feelings and thoughts (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2004). Interpreting memorable tourist experiences through online reviews can inform, support or oppose current practices and policies (Yu et al., 2021). According to Church and Frost (2004), tourists' narratives are a fundamental resource in constructing tourism strategies. In this context, online customer reviews can offer content with significant opportunities. According to Yüksel and Yüksel (2004: 176), the primary purpose of content analysis is to reach the whole of concepts and relations that can explain the collected data. Yu et al. (2021) suggest that schemas that highlight the memorable memories of tourists can be obtained from the analysis of their most frequent words in online reviews. This study has employed content analysis and descriptive analysis techniques in the data analysis.

Online customer reviews are short narratives and therefore contain key highlights (Yu et al., 2021). In this study, 640 e-reviews (15241 words) were examined. First, all e-reviews were exported to Word document and each was read and analyzed over and over. After reading, the patterns (direct quotations) were revealed, the codes within the determined patterns were reached, and finally the themes were obtained from the codes.

### **3.2. Population and sample**

The research population consisted of all theme restaurants in Lviv (Ukraine) and their customers online reviews. The limited number of themed restaurants in Turkey, the fact that many Turkish tourists visit the city of Lviv and the city of Lviv is an important destination in terms of themed restaurants has been effective in choosing the city of Lviv as a study area. The research sample comprised the top five theme restaurants in this city and 640 online reviews shared by Turkish customers of the restaurants on the Tripadvisor website. The sample selection in qualitative research is usually purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016; Berg & Lune, 2017). Most of the restaurants in Lviv city had specific themes, however, in line with the information from the internet environment and the personal

visits to all theme restaurants, the five most suitable ones for the theme restaurant concept were chosen through the purposeful sampling technique (see Table 2). These restaurants in Lviv were the “most visited” theme restaurants in the city. The researcher personally visited and experienced each restaurant and collected information from their employees about the operations. Each restaurant was observed at specific times of the day (lunch, evening, night) for three days and obtained information about the services, theme decor, and theme applications. In general, the customer base of these restaurants consisted of local and foreign tourists visiting the region. Tourists from different countries like Poland, Germany, the UK, Turkey, etc., were observed to receive service from theme restaurants and took photos intensively. Although it was desired to interview Turkish tourists served by theme restaurants, in-depth interviews could not be conducted because of the limited free time of the tourists visiting the region. However, the examination of the online reviews of theme restaurants showed that Turkish tourists had shared their theme restaurant experiences on online platforms, and these shares coincided with the researcher’s own theme restaurant experiences. In this context, the researcher’s experiences, participant observations, and online customer shares were used as data to determine the theme restaurant experiences of Turkish tourists.

Table 2 shows some information about themed restaurants included in the survey. Lviv was chosen as the study area because many theme restaurants in this city play a significant role in tourism activities, so much so that theme restaurant tours organized in Lviv are a special touristic product package and marketed to tourists visiting the city.

**Table 2.** Theme Restaurants Included in the Study

Restaurant name	Theme	Number of e-reviews	Access address for e-reviews
<b>Gasova Lampa</b>	Oil lamp	1170	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d5123699-Reviews-Gasova_Lampa-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d5123699-Reviews-Gasova_Lampa-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html</a>
<b>5th Dungeon</b>	Medieval	173	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g295377-d17603970-r732783040-5_Pidzemellya-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g295377-d17603970-r732783040-5_Pidzemellya-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html</a>
<b>Masoch Café</b>	Masochism	249	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d8682964-Reviews-Masoch_Hotel_Cafe-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d8682964-Reviews-Masoch_Hotel_Cafe-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html</a>
<b>Kryivka</b>	2. World War	2252	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d1128411-Reviews-Kryivka-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html#photos;aggregationId=101&amp;albumid=101&amp;filter=7&amp;ff=244034025">https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d1128411-Reviews-Kryivka-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html#photos;aggregationId=101&amp;albumid=101&amp;filter=7&amp;ff=244034025</a>
<b>Meat and Justice</b>	Torture	1755	<a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d5063753-Reviews-or10-The_First_Lviv_Grill_Restaurant_of_Meat_and_Justice-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g295377-d5063753-Reviews-or10-The_First_Lviv_Grill_Restaurant_of_Meat_and_Justice-Lviv_Lviv_Oblast.html</a>

**Gasova Lampa (Gas Lamp):** It is a four-floor theme restaurant designed to honor the inventor of the gas lamp, where antique gas lamps decorate and light everywhere on each floor. Here, the employees dress in accordance with the concept and visitors have an opportunity to experience various surprises at any stage of their visit. The restaurant is one of the main hangouts of tourists visiting Lviv. If requested, a short restaurant presentation and souvenirs sold in a different authentic section are available in the venue.

**The 5th Dungeon:** The restaurant, which carries the theme of a Middle Age dungeon, provides a unique restaurant experience with its stone walls, the tools used in the service, the music playing, the candle lighting, and the decorations used. In addition, the clothes and behavior of the employees offer a holistic medieval atmosphere. The restaurant, which gives its visitors the feeling of eating in the dungeon in the best way, is a place frequently visited by local and foreign tourists.

**Masoch Café:** It is a restaurant with a theme of masochism, allegedly opened in memory of the author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the father of masochism. Although it is called a cafe, it has a typical restaurant menu. In the establishment where the menu, service, environment, music, and employees are suitable for masochism, whipping of customers by working women is the most remarkable practice. It has been seen that this theme restaurant-café, which may be one of the weirdest restaurants in the world with



its strange activities, is among the favorite places of tourists who want to have a different dining experience.

**Kryivka:** It is a theme restaurant inspired by the bunker tunnels of the Second World War. In the restaurant adopting the Ukrainian Army Bunker as a theme, employees serve in military uniforms. In addition, the war tools exhibited both in its courtyard and on the roof of the restaurant provide a different museum experience to its visitors and offer the opportunity to take entertaining photographs. The restaurant's interior design, exterior design, menu, employees, and even a different welcome at the entrance (the soldier in military uniform asking for the password to enter Kryivka) attract the attention of tourists, and it has been chosen as an exemplary restaurant.

**Meat and Justice:** A fireside grill restaurant with a decoration of medieval torture instruments. The most striking theme of the restaurant is to create a different entertainment environment by torturing a volunteer customer with torture devices. Customer satisfaction is aimed by creating action with the atmosphere and music and providing a delicious dining experience.

#### 4. Findings

This section includes e-reviews and findings from participant observations. Table 3 shows the evaluations made by Turkish tourists about the theme restaurants they were served. Of the 640 reviews examined, 84.99% were rated excellent and very good. The number of tourists who stated that they were not satisfied remained at 5.77%.

**Table 3.** Turkish tourists' reviews of theme restaurants

Rating	Number of e-reviews	%
Excellent	358	%55,94
Very good	186	%29,06
Average	59	%9,21
Poor	20	%3,13
Terrible	17	%2,66
<b>Total</b>	640	%100

Through the e-reviews and participant observation notes, five main themes constituting the theme restaurant experience were identified: atmosphere, entertainment, staff, emotions, and sensory experiences. According to the findings obtained from the e-reviews, while 5.77% of customers expressed dissatisfaction with several situations, most Turkish tourists who received service from theme restaurants made statements about behavioral intentions (revisiting, recommending, willingness to pay more). Each theme is explained below, and direct citations are included to increase data reliability. Customer e-reviews used in direct quotations are shown as C1, C2, C3...

##### 4.1. Atmosphere

The atmosphere of theme restaurants is one of the main elements that makes up the memorable experiences for Turkish tourists. Accordingly, Turkish tourists who had received service from theme restaurants defined the atmosphere of the restaurants as different, pleasant, curious, authentic, stylish, mystical, original, gentle, fantastic, unique, and impressive. Therefore, the atmosphere of theme restaurants is determined to be a significant factor that creates memorable experiences for tourists. The following direct e-reviews and one-on-one observations on the subject demonstrate this:



**Table 4.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on atmosphere

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>It's a unique environment with hundreds of different gas lamps inside. It's a 3-4 story building with a very different and beautiful atmosphere. A must-see place, you can take beautiful pictures (C12).</i>	Different, Pleasant,	Atmosphere
<i>The ambiance is authentic; old gas lamps are everywhere. Go up to the terrace and watch the incredible view and environment (C31).</i>	Curious, Authentic,	
<i>I felt like I was in The Lord of the Rings in Middle-earth. You definitely go here. It has a great atmosphere (C128).</i>	Stylish, Mystical,	
<i>I'd be lying if I said I had been to a concept restaurant like this one before. One of the must-see places in Lviv (C263).</i>	Original, Gentle,	
<i>A destination that you should visit when you go to Lviv. It is an original restaurant with an enthralling entrance story that you can tell for years (C321).</i>	Fantastic, Unique,	
<i>The ambiance is super. Waiters walking around with axes offer experiences of medieval life (C508).</i>	Impressive	

Observations during the research also show that the atmosphere of themed restaurants provides memorable experiences. In fact, tourists' conversations, reactions (such as being surprised, tone of voice), and photographs or video recordings in the restaurants express their astonishment about the atmosphere. Below are the photos reflecting the atmosphere of the two restaurants that customers frequently highlight.



**Figure 1.** A part of 5th Dungeon service hall (left), Souvenir section of Gas Lamp restaurant (right). (Source: Taken by the author).

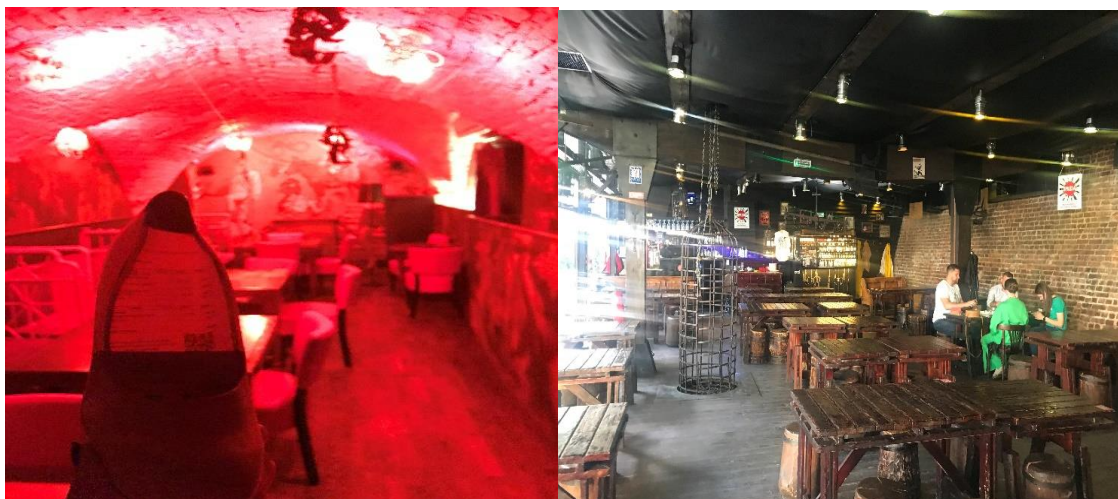
## 4.2. Entertainment

After the atmosphere, another theme that shapes tourists' experiences in theme restaurants is entertainment. In this context, practices such as shows, fiction, animations, fun payment methods, punishments, tortures, and different rituals in theme restaurants impressively engage customers in having fun experiences. Such entertainment experiences can turn into memorable experiences and positively affect tourists' behavioral intentions. Below are some shares of Turkish customers of theme restaurants who expressed that they had fun experiences.

**Table 5.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on entertainment

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>Many people get whipped here by the staff for entertainment, and others in the cafe take their photos or videos. It's a fun place (C201).</i>	Shows, Fictions, Animations,	Entertainment
<i>If you come to Lviv, go there! The man at the door is very entertaining. The inside is huge; it is difficult to get out without getting lost (C254).</i>	Fun payment methods,	
<i>We witnessed two of the punishments, and it was fun. The bill came with an ax (C374).</i>	Punishments,	
<i>There are many sadistic-themed venues in Lviv. Of course for entertainment. They try to make the customers spend a good time here (C462).</i>	Tortures, Different rituals	
<i>Torture shows were incredibly entertaining (C464).</i>		
<i>There's also a showman inside, very sweet. He puts people in an iron cage and lowers them into something like a well. It makes various performances dating back to the Middle Age. It's so fun (C522).</i>		

In the observations within the research, it has been seen that the themed restaurants attempt to offer their customers enjoyable experiences. Starting from the external appearance of the restaurant (guest welcoming and entrance) to taking orders and bills, shows during the meal, employees' clothes and setups, astonishing service ways (such as serving coffee with fire in the dark) aim to entertain the customers in general. Of course, such activities offer much more fun than a typical restaurant can do, and such restaurants can turn into entertainment centers for tourists. Below are some photos of the activities of the theme restaurants to entertain their customers.



**Figure 2.** The lower floor service hall of Masoch cafe, and bringing a bill in a woman's shoe (left). A torture device (iron cage) used for entertainment in the Meat and Justice restaurant (right). (Source: Taken by the author).

#### 4.3. Staff

Employees in themed restaurants, as in the entire service sector, are among the factors that shape the memorable experiences of tourists, either positively or negatively. So much so that the qualities of the staff in theme restaurants such as being friendly, polite, funny, helpful, interested, sincere, knowing English, wearing clothes suitable for the concept, and being well-educated have favorably influenced the experiences of Turkish tourists. It has been observed that the staff's uniforms in theme restaurants, service, and the way the staff greets the customers affect memorable experiences. The e-reviews of the customers on the subject are below. In addition, the images of the staff working in themed restaurants are presented in Figure 3.

**Table 6.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on staff

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>Simply I was blown away. The atmosphere is fantastic, and the employees are concerned (C159).</i>	Friendly, Polite, Funny,	Staff
<i>The staff is quick and helpful (C114).</i>	Helpful, Interested,	
<i>The waitress who took care of us spoke English very well. She was very kind and smiling (C95).</i>	Sincere,	
<i>The place is very entertaining and has an original concept. Waiters in military clothes serve inside (C109).</i>	Knowing English, Wearing clothes	
<i>The clothes, attitude, and service of the staff are friendly (C492).</i>	suitable for the concept,	
<i>It makes your visit unforgettable with its friendly staff (C580).</i>	Being well-educated	



**Figure 3.** Gasova Lampa (Gaslamp) restaurant entrance and waiting staff (left), a staff member in Medieval age clothing at the 5th Dungeon restaurant (right). (Source: Taken by the author).

#### 4.4. Emotions

The online shares of Turkish tourists visiting theme restaurants show their intense emotional experiences of happiness, pleasure, excitement, joy, surprise, and contentment in restaurants. Below are direct quotations from the e-reviews of some Turkish tourists regarding their emotions.

**Table 7.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on emotions

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>There's no need to say something about the beer, anyway; delicious. The meals were also successful, but the excitement of the place was enough for me. You must go there at least once (C111).</i>	Happiness, Pleasure,	Emotions
<i>Reference is Ukrainian Independent Army, great atmosphere, great food, glorious music, we were thrilled here (C321).</i>	Excitement,	
<i>Many people get whipped by the restaurant staff here for entertainment, and those in the cafe can take their photos or videos (C38).</i>	Joy,	
<i>Be sure to get the account on the table. A pleasant surprise will be waiting for you. But prepare your camera in the meantime (C12).</i>	Surprise,	
<i>The most strange place I've ever been. We dropped by with three friends. We were all satisfied (C406).</i>	Contentment	

After personally visiting and experiencing theme restaurants, the researcher has witnessed more different experiences and emotions compared to regular restaurants. Apart from being ordinary places to eat, such theme restaurants provide a memorable restaurant experience as their customers experience distinct emotions. So the customers desire to revisit these restaurants in the future and recommend them to their friends. In the observations, customers have been witnessed to experience intense emotions in these venues. So much so that the customers cannot hide their astonishment, and they keep their cameras on hand, as if they have come to a unique, original museum, not a restaurant. In particular, being asked for passwords at the entrance, entertaining torture animations, and surprises during the meal made the researcher and other customers feel intense emotions.

#### 4.5. Senses

All food and beverage businesses work hard to provide their customers with stimulative experiences. Turkish tourists who receive service from theme restaurants have been observed to share their e-reviews about their senses on social media. In this context, the sensory tastes (taste, smell, sight, hearing, touch) that theme restaurants offer to their customers help shape memorable experiences. Of course, the basic expectation from a restaurant is to be served food and beverages of good quality (in terms of taste, hygiene, price-performance, friendly behavior). The sharings of some Turkish tourists about their sensory experiences in theme restaurants are as follows:



**Table 8.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on senses

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>It's nice to see surprising things around while you eat. When the bill comes, they hit on it with a cleaver. Everyone looked in the direction the voice came from. We took a selfie with the executioner on the way out the door (C522).</i>	Taste,	Senses
<i>I am happy to smell that kerosene smell reminding me of childhood (C87).</i>	Smell,	
<i>Serviced meat was at the level of world cuisine and had a unique taste (C472).</i>	Sight,	
<i>You see something amazing everywhere while eating (C528).</i>	Hearing,	
	Touch	

#### 4.6. Behavioral intentions

The analysis of theme-restaurant-related shares of Turkish tourists has revealed that those who express especially memorable experiences will have positive behavioral intentions of revisiting, recommending, and paying more. In this context, it can be stated that Turkish tourists have experienced intense sensory and emotional experiences with the atmosphere, entertainment, and working staff of the themed restaurants they received service. As a result, all these features (themes) that shape experiences in theme restaurants turn into memorable experiences and enable tourists to exhibit positive behavioral intentions. In this context, it has been understood that tourists who were satisfied with theme restaurants' memorable service want to revisit these restaurants and advise their relatives about these restaurants in Lviv. However, although some tourists find the service cost high, they have commented that the positive experiences are worth this price. Below are some e-reviews from Turkish tourists:

**Table 9.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on behavioral intentions

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>Do not leave Ukraine without dropping by here. The place has a unique concept, and its accounting methods are flawless. The prices are reasonable. Don't forget to eat ice cream (C49).</i>	Revisiting,	Behavioral Intentions
<i>One of the places where the ambiance should be experienced. Must go. Don't forget to visit (C125).</i>	Recommending,	
<i>The atmosphere is high; you should visit it (C285).</i>	Paying more	
<i>Would I go again? Yes, Yes, Yes (C408).</i>		
<i>I went once with my wife, and I will drop by when I come to Lviv again this year. The meats and the ambiance are exceptional (C424).</i>		
<i>Expensive place, but it's worth the money (C374).</i>		

#### 4.7. Dissatisfied factors in theme restaurants

Although almost all the Turkish tourists who experienced the theme restaurants were satisfied, 5.77% of the customers expressed dissatisfaction with the service. Accordingly, some tourists complained about the lack of hygiene, tasteless food, slow service, high prices, overcrowding, and the queue at the restaurant door. Below are some complaints about theme restaurants:

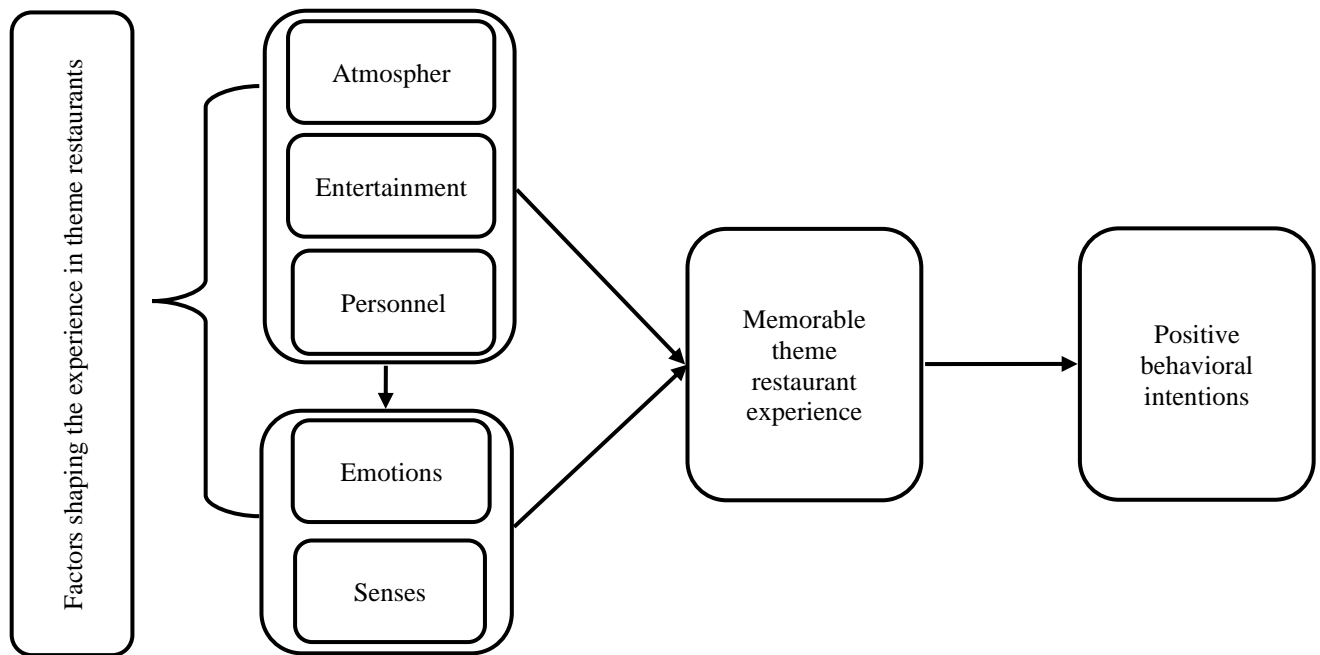
**Table 10.** E-reviews and one-on-one observations on dissatisfied factors in theme restaurants

Online Reviews	Codes	Theme
<i>Food was cold, and the service was poor (C101).</i>	Lack of hygiene,	Dissatisfied factors
<i>Dozens of people are waiting in line at the door (C259).</i>	Tasteless food,	
<i>Too crowded, too hot, suffocating (C359).</i>	Slow service,	
<i>Service is already slow. In short, a fiasco (C476).</i>	High prices,	
<i>The food is awful, the beers are hot and disgusting. It is also a very bad place in terms of hygiene (C277)</i>	Overcrowding,	
<i>A place that has become more expensive in proportion to the depreciation of the Turkish Lira... (C426)</i>	The queue at the restaurant door	

### 5. Discussion

The rapid increase in food and beverage businesses has brought intense competition. Therefore, food and beverage businesses that want to gain a competitive advantage in an intensely competitive environment make significant efforts to differ and develop original restaurant concepts to meet changing consumer

needs and expectations. Theme restaurants can have the potential to meet disparate customer expectations (the demands of customers who want to have memorable experiences). Today, restaurant businesses realize that tourists have expectations from food and beverage businesses to feed themselves with delicious foods and their emotions with different shows, such as themes, animations, etc. The current study carried out in themed restaurants operating in Lviv has examined the theme restaurant experiences of Turkish tourists. As seen in Figure 4, the features that shape the consumer experience in theme restaurants are grouped under five main themes. These features offered to customers in theme restaurants can turn into memorable restaurant experiences and result in positive behavioral intentions. Emotions, senses, atmosphere, entertainment, and personnel affect the experience theme. Each theme is discussed below.



**Figure 4.** Tourist experience model in theme restaurants.

According to the results, the first theme that shapes the memorable experiences of Turkish tourists served in theme restaurants is the "atmosphere." Previous studies (Bitner, 1992; Ha & Jang, 2010; Heung & Gu, 2012; Anlı Kurtar & Yavan, 2019; Karaca & Koroğlu, 2018; Akkuş, 2019) have emphasized the importance of atmosphere. Anlı Kurtar and Yavan (2019) have pointed out the importance of atmosphere in their work on Starbucks and Kahve Dünyası. They have claimed it is the venue that creates the experience rather than the product. The authors draw attention to the fact that experience is an acquisition obtained from the space, and the atmosphere establishes the relationship of the consumed product with emotion or experience. Heung and Gu (2012) have stated that the restaurant atmosphere significantly impacts customers' food satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Akkuş (2019) has suggested that creating a dynamic atmosphere in food and beverage businesses can provide memorable experiences and atmosphere that can affect the customers' purchasing decisions, which will make people think they are buying or experiencing something completely different. Ha and Jang (2010) have found that the atmosphere perceived before the dining experience in restaurants plays a significant role in customers' consumption behavior and that when customers have a higher perception of the atmosphere, their satisfaction and loyalty levels are higher. As a result, it is seen that the atmosphere theme, which is specific to theme restaurants in this study, is substantial for other restaurant types as well. This result is supported by previous studies.

Another theme shaping the experiences of Turkish tourists who get service from themed restaurants is "entertainment." Previous studies (Ryu & Jang, 2008; Han & Jeong, 2013; Akyürek & Kutukız, 2020) have also announced that the entertainment factor is one of the most critical components that form memorable experiences in food and beverage businesses. According to Ryu and Jang (2008), tourists seek entertaining

details in the food and beverage establishments to enrich their dining experience. Similarly, Karamustafa and Ülker (2018) draw attention to the fact that, until the industrialization, human beings had been consuming food and beverages as vital needs (for feeding themselves), but that people now attribute different meanings to eating and drinking, such as socialization, entertainment, enjoyment, and excitement. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), theme restaurants act as a stage for the experience, with the concept known as "eatertainment." In this context, entertainment plays a significant role in shaping the memorable experiences of tourists who receive service from theme restaurants. As a result, the theme obtained within the study complies with previous studies.

Another theme effective in the memorable experiences of tourists who receive service from themed restaurants is the "personnel." Every personnel interacting with the customer (service, kitchen, welcome, etc.) plays a critical role in creating memorable experiences. Similarly, Yan and Felicen (2021) draw attention to the fact that the interaction between service personnel and customers provides interactive experiences for customers, besides language use and appearance of service personnel can provide customers with different sensory experiences. Muskat et al. (2019) has argued that if the interactions of staff working in food and beverage businesses with tourists are well managed, the dining experience of tourists can enhance. Akyürek and Kutukız (2020) have argued that interactions with personnel during the food service may shape tourists' all emotions on experience. Karaca and Köroğlu (2018) have determined that the personnel is the most influential factor for customers in the restaurant atmosphere. As a result, the resulting theme complies with previous studies.

In theme restaurants, atmosphere, entertainment, and the staff are dynamic themes, making tourists have memorable experiences. However, such experiential features offered in theme restaurants are also effective in experiencing emotional experiences. Expressed by Schmitt (1999), Aho (2001), and Dube and Le Bel (2003), emotional experiences are intensely perceived by tourists served in theme restaurants. According to Schmitt (1999), emotional experiences reflect the emotions and mood of the customer in the areas where he receives service. Tung and Ritchie (2011) have found that various positive emotions associated with experiences help form a memory. According to Ladhari, Brun, and Morales (2008), positive emotions created in customers have more impact on customer satisfaction than negative emotions. According to the authors, emotions mediate the effect of perceived service quality on meal satisfaction. According to Meng and Choi (2017), positive emotions trigger customers' satisfying dining experiences. Therefore, any effort to generate positive emotion should develop as a core marketing strategy. Yan and Felicen (2021) have, on the other hand, argued that a well-designed environment creates a pleasant atmosphere experience for customers and that a good image and management strengthen customers' emotional identification with theme restaurants. Emotions are a significant determinant of satisfaction (Ladhari et al., 2008). A restaurant atmosphere can affect a consumer's emotions and overall satisfaction. Ha and Jang (2010) have stated that emotions created through the atmosphere trigger the customer's reaction. Mattila and Gao (2017) have claimed that in a restaurant environmentally designed to create emotional effects, the atmosphere can increase customers' purchase intention. As a result, the theme restaurant's atmosphere, entertainment, and staff can increase the positive emotions of tourists and enable tourists to have an memorable restaurant experience.

The last theme obtained within the study is sense-related experiences. Sensory experiences put forward by Schmitt (1999), Aho (2001), and Dube and Le Bel (2003) are prominent in online reviews of tourists served in theme restaurants. Of course, sensory experiences are at the forefront of the experiences that all restaurant businesses make splendid efforts to provide to their customers. Heung and Gu (2012) pointed out that the atmosphere is perceived through the senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). The current study carried out on the theme restaurant has determined that the positive sensory experiences of the tourists are influential in their memorable experiences.

According to the results, it is noteworthy that Turkish tourists who had memorable experiences in theme restaurants have shared that they would express positive behavioral intentions. Previous studies (Weiss et al., 2004; Ladhari et al., 2008; Ha & Jang, 2010; Karaca & Köroğlu, 2018; Ramires et al., 2018; Wei et al.,

2019) also support the obtained results. Ladhari et al. (2008) have stated that a pleasant restaurant atmosphere will inspire customers to spend more time and money than a restaurant atmosphere that makes customers feel unpleasant. Ramires et al. (2018) have pointed out that tourists' satisfaction and revisit intentions are highly correlated with their experience in tourism activities. The same is true for food and beverage businesses. In fact, the memorable experiences of Turkish tourists in theme restaurants positively affect their satisfaction and behavioral intentions (revisit, advice, more spending) (Ha & Jang, 2010). On the other hand, Han and Ryu (2009) have pointed out that customers who are not satisfied with their experience in the restaurant will not have positive or high behavioral intentions. Restaurants need to offer their experiential atmosphere, entertainment, and staff services in the best possible way to provide memorable experiences to their customers.

Not all tourist experiences are memorable experiences. Memorable tourism experiences comprise both positive and negative experiences (Wei et al., 2019). According to the study findings, the factors that negatively shape the tourist experiences are lack of hygiene, tasteless food, slow service, unreasonable bills, overcrowded restaurants, and queues at the restaurant entrance. In their study, Akyürek and Kutukız have stated that one of the most significant points of gastro tourists is product-based experiences. Quality, presentation, hygiene, and price of products have been determined as the most decisive issues for tourists. In their study on green restaurants, Kızılcık and Akyürek (2021) have reported that the restaurant customers are most dissatisfied with factors such as lack of hygiene, poor service, and high bills. In this context, restaurant businesses should first focus on the taste, appearance, price, and hygiene of the meals and, later, develop other elements. Weiss et al. (2004) have emphasized that theme restaurants can no longer market themselves with innovation alone. The findings show that although innovation-related experiences are fantastic for customers, they are insufficient. Therefore, restaurant managers should improve their dining experience, besides innovation and diversity, and pay more attention to the taste, quality, and price.

## 6. Conclusions

The study examined the memorable restaurant experiences of Turkish tourists who receive service from theme restaurants. The results of the study will offer contributions to both theory and practice. In the study, the themes that shape the memorable experiences of tourists served by theme restaurants were divided into five categories: atmosphere, entertainment, staff, emotions, and senses. Furthermore, negative situations experienced by tourists in theme restaurants and their behavioral intentions were determined. The obtained themes were supported by previous studies, and a model for the theme restaurant experience was proposed (see Figure 4).

In the end, the study makes some suggestions to theme restaurant operators and entrepreneurs. First, offering unique and different experiences to the customers in terms of atmosphere, entertainment, and personnel will provide customer satisfaction and a competitive advantage. Such services will enhance tourists' emotional and sensory experiences, which will enable tourists to exhibit positive behavioral intentions. A particularly engaging atmosphere will provide tourists with more than just dining experiences, which will give the businesses an advantage in today's competitive market conditions.

For theme restaurant businesses, atmosphere, entertainment, and staff are very significant factors, and these elements can provide sensory and emotional experiences to customers. The food offered on the menu is still the most crucial factor for all restaurants. Reviews have shown that tourists experience a lack of hygiene, poor meal, slow service, and high prices, which cause dissatisfaction. It is equally essential for theme restaurateurs to emphasize the overall service besides the central theme. Food-related elements, such as hygiene, taste, smell, temperature, portion, and price, should be offered to customers in the best possible way so that they will not impact the entire dining experience negatively. A hygienically low meal can also turn into a memorable experience and have negative behavioral consequences. In this respect, restaurant businesses should pay attention to the general services besides the determined theme.



The tourists visiting theme restaurants usually request to take photos and shop for souvenirs. Because of this reason, theme restaurant entrepreneurs need to create areas where customers can take memorable photographs. Designing souvenirs that reflect the restaurant theme and selling items in thematic places can increase the restaurant's profitability. Thus, while creating increased profitability, customer satisfaction, and loyalty, the customer leaves the restaurant with pleasant memories. Souvenirs reflecting the restaurant theme will enable customers to share their experiences with their surroundings when they return home and increase the restaurant's popularity.

When observing themed restaurants operating in Lviv, one of the most striking findings is that such restaurants are often established in the basements of buildings. This situation made it possible to use a generally inactive part of a building by designing the basement as a restaurant. These restaurants, which are in high demand, can provide memorable experiences by benefiting idle sections and serving in the most central places of the city with more affordable rents. Considering that the rents are high in touristic destinations, encouraging such themed restaurant initiatives can provide significant financial opportunities. Theme restaurants are chiefly preferred by tourists looking for difference and escape (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In future years, theme restaurants in the sector will see more demand than standard restaurants that are copies of each other. As a result, supporting such restaurants can contribute to the marketing of destinations in terms of touristic product variety. The city of Lviv is a significant example of practice in this context.

This study is limited to five theme restaurants operating in Lviv. Future studies can be extended to cover different regions. The primary data source for the current study is 640 reviews on the Tripadvisor webpage made by Turkish tourists served in five theme restaurants. However, in order to support the data, the researcher personally has visited and experienced all theme restaurants in Lviv. Future studies can be conducted using different data collection techniques (such as interviews and questionnaires). For example, the memorable experiences of tourists from different nationalities served in theme restaurants can be examined, and comparative studies can be made. Besides, the experience of a new customer may differ from that of a regular one. As a customer's familiarity with a restaurant increases, their perception of a positive atmosphere may decrease. In this context, the experiences of customers who go to such restaurants for the second or third time and those who go for the first time can be investigated. Finally, to present different perspectives on the subject, studies can be carried out on theme restaurant employees, operators, or local people, apart from customers. Studies can determine the advantages and disadvantages of working in a theme restaurant in terms of employees and owners.

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