



# UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

## THE ART OF PLATING: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF FOOD PRESENTATION ON BRAND EXPERIENCE

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain  
a Master's Degree in Communication, Marketing and  
Advertising

By

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Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

October 2023



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## **Abstract**

The main objective of the present dissertation was to examine the relationship between the visual presentation of food, especially in the context of brunch restaurants, and its influence on the multidimensional notion of brand experience. This research was exploratory in nature due to no solid evidence found regarding brand experience variables and food presentation; therefore, no predefined hypotheses were used, but research questions guided the study. To thoroughly understand the subject, the theoretical framework covered three main areas: the world of food and food service; the visual presentation of food; and the notion of brand experience. In order to apply the theoretical findings in a practical context, three focus group discussions were held, with the focus on one restaurant in Budapest serving as a tool for the analysis. The insights gained from these groups served as real-world examples, highlighting the intricate relationship between food presentation and brand experience.

Findings revealed that food presentation plays a significant role in contemporary dining culture, shaping first impressions, guiding selections, and indicating restaurants' commitment to quality, especially in the digital age. Moreover, the study found that food presentation enhances various dimensions of brand experience, although its impact varies: it significantly influences sensory brand experiences, mainly the visual and taste perceptions; it is less prominent in affective brand experiences, where other factors play a more crucial role; it also shapes behavioural brand experiences, encouraging photography, online sharing, and culinary exploration; and its impact on intellectual brand experiences varies, with some seeing it inspiring and others merely aesthetic. It was also suggested that plating should align with a restaurant's character and audience, with unique styles providing a distinct edge. However, plating is just one aspect of a holistic brand experience, necessitating a multifaceted strategy for contemporary diners.

**Keywords:** Food Presentation, Brand Experience, Brand Experience Dimensions, Restaurant Branding, Restaurant Industry.

## Resumo

O principal objetivo da presente dissertação foi examinar a relação entre a apresentação visual da comida, especialmente no contexto dos restaurantes de *brunch*, e a sua influência na noção multidimensional de experiência de marca. Esta investigação teve uma natureza exploratória, devido a não terem sido encontradas evidências sólidas no que diz respeito às variáveis de experiência da marca e de apresentação de alimentos; assim, não foram utilizadas hipóteses pré-definidas, mas questões de investigação orientaram o estudo. Para alcançar uma compreensão aprofundada do tema, o enquadramento teórico abrangeu três áreas principais, nomeadamente: o mundo da alimentação e do serviço alimentar; a apresentação visual dos alimentos; e a noção de experiência de marca. A fim de aplicar os resultados teóricos num contexto prático, foram realizadas três discussões em *focus group*, centradas num restaurante em Budapeste que serviu de ferramenta para a análise. Os conhecimentos adquiridos nestes grupos serviram como exemplos reais, realçando a relação intrincada entre a apresentação dos alimentos e a experiência de marca.

Os resultados revelaram que a apresentação dos alimentos desempenha um papel significativo na cultura gastronómica contemporânea, moldando as primeiras impressões, orientando as seleções e indicando o compromisso dos restaurantes com a qualidade, especialmente na era digital. Além disso, o estudo concluiu que a apresentação dos alimentos melhora várias dimensões da experiência da marca, embora o seu impacto varie: influencia significativamente as experiências sensoriais da marca, principalmente as percepções visuais e gustativas; é menos proeminente nas experiências afetivas da marca, onde outros fatores desempenham um papel mais significativo; também molda as experiências comportamentais da marca, incentivando a fotografia, a partilha online e a exploração culinária; e o seu impacto nas experiências intelectuais da marca varia, com alguns a considerarem inspiradora e outros meramente estética. Foi também sugerido que o empratamento deve estar de acordo com o carácter e o público de um restaurante, com estilos únicos que proporcionam uma vantagem distintiva. No entanto, o empratamento é apenas um aspeto de uma experiência de marca holística, necessitando de uma estratégia multifacetada para os clientes contemporâneos.

Palavras-chave: Apresentação de Alimentos, Experiência de Marca, Dimensões da Experiência de Marca, Branding de Restaurantes, Restauração.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the years, food has evolved from being a basic human necessity to serving various roles in contemporary society (Civitello, 2008). As of today, restaurants, cafés, and pubs are not only places for consumption. Rather, they have transitioned into multifunctional spaces that facilitate leisure, socialisation, and even professional interactions, reflecting the cultural significance of eating out (Astuti & Hanan, 2016; Fieldhouse, 1996). Hence, these developments highlight the notable transformation in dining practices, reinforcing their fundamental role in many aspects of everyday life and society as a whole (Crowther, 2018; Pilcher, 2012; Sobreira et al., 2018; Walker, 2017).

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the importance of branding in the context of the restaurant industry. While branding is important in many sectors, it has emerged as a vital success factor in the restaurant industry due to the high level of competition (McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023). As a result, it is not enough for restaurants to simply serve delicious meals. They must showcase their unique offers and create a distinct identity, allowing them to form emotional relationships with their customers. As a result, a good brand strategy is essential not just for creating long-lasting impressions but also for standing out in a crowded market (Bistrohub, 2020; Kakadiya, 2023; McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023).

This evolution of dining and the subsequent rise in competition among restaurants also corresponds with broader shifts in the economic and social landscapes (Schmitt et al., 2014). Along with the transitions of such dynamics, the roles and expectations of brands in individuals' lives have changed (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Hwang et al., 2021). Today's customers seek out businesses that resonate with their emotions, engage their senses, and align with their lifestyles. Hence, they prioritise brands that offer more than just functionality and emphasise meaningful and enjoyable experiences (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Hwang et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014). Consequently, restaurants should not only provide good quality and price but also offer distinctive experiences that encompass both practical and symbolic values for guests (Ong et al., 2018).

Moreover, delving deeper into the contemporary dining culture, the increased significance of food presentation is undeniable. In fact, although the famous phrase 'we eat first with our eyes' has ancient origins, its meaning has never been more accurate (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Michel et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2016). Plating in restaurants does not only act as a

decoration tool, but it is also considered to be part of a holistic dining experience, which might enhance the overall enjoyment of a meal, as well as influence guests' food choices and preferences (Cifci et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2014). Additionally, while the appreciation of an aesthetically presented meal is timeless, the rise of the digital age has increased its significance, reflecting the widespread trend of sharing food experiences online (Spence et al., 2016).

Therefore, given the rising prominence of food presentation, delving deeper into its connection with brands and branding is both timely and relevant. In fact, although there is an increasing body of literature focusing on the art of plating, a significant gap remains in understanding its interplay with various brand constructs. Therefore, the present dissertation aims to help bridge this gap by examining how plating within the context of brunch restaurants can influence the overall brand experience as well as its various dimensions. The selection of brunch for this study is due to its inherently photogenic appeal, which aligns with the trends of today's social media-centric culture (Future Food Strategy Group, 2018; Hartley, 2021).

In order to reach this goal, a structured strategy is developed, beginning with the theoretical framework of this study, which is built around three main chapters, each of which explores distinct yet connected aspects of the research topic. The first chapter's main goal is to provide a detailed examination of the world of food and food service. The section begins with demonstrating the social role of food, highlighting its importance in the social landscape. Afterwards, it continues with the birth of restaurants and dining out, with a special focus on 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century China and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Paris. Moreover, the fundamental characteristics of modern restaurants are discussed. Due to the industry's growing size, readers may also become acquainted with the most common restaurant segmentations. Additionally, in light of the study's objective, brunch restaurants are examined more in-depth, with an exploration of their origins and contemporary significance. Finally, the chapter explores the restaurant industry today, with a special focus on the main innovations and trends of recent years.

Afterwards, the second chapter delves into the visual presentation of food and the art of plating. It first highlights the rising importance of the subject in the contemporary dining landscape. Then, it continues with the role of sensory science in food perception and highlights the connection of each five senses to dining experiences with a special attention

on sight, and the visual perception of food. A brief history of plating is also explored, showcasing major figures and events that have shaped the presentation of food throughout the years. The chapter then concludes with an exploration of modern plating trends, focusing on aspects such as colour, shape, balance, and arrangement.

Finally, the third chapter of the literature review delves into the realm of branding in the restaurant industry, as well as the concept of brand experience. It begins with emphasising the importance of branding in the competitive landscape of the restaurant industry. The discussion then shifts to define the evolving notion of brand experience and its relevance in today's world. A detailed exploration of the four distinct dimensions of brand experience – sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual – is also presented, highlighting their unique characteristics and contributions. In plus, it further identifies the effects of brand experience on other brand-related constructs. The chapter then concludes by examining the role and importance of brand experiences in the restaurant sector.

Based on the defined strategy, the dissertation then moves to the empirical part of the research. Due to the exploratory nature of the subject matter, a qualitative approach was implemented as the chosen methodology. Therefore, in order to gain in-depth insights and explanations, three focus groups were conducted. Notably, for the purpose of collecting genuine, real-world experiences, a specific brunch restaurant in Budapest, Hungary, was chosen as the primary focus of the study. After the methodological presentation, which introduces the research questions, sampling, data strategy and analysis, as well as ethical considerations, the findings of the research are revealed and subsequently analysed and discussed as the next part of the dissertation. Finally, the dissertation concludes by summarizing key insights and implications, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

# **I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

## **2. The World of Food and Food Service**

The food and food service sectors are a fundamental component of human existence, impacting not just our everyday lives but also our cultural, social, and economic landscapes. Hence, the upcoming chapter's objective is to provide an in-depth examination of the world of food and food service, by exploring the birth of dining out, highlighting the main characteristics of modern restaurants, discussing the common market segmentations, and focusing on brunch restaurants as a unique category. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the main innovations and current trends in the restaurant industry.

### **2.1 The Social Role of Food**

Food consumption is an important part of human society, fulfilling both physiological and cultural functions. It is a basic necessity and hence a routine practice that also incorporates a wide range of social, political, economic, and aesthetic considerations, regardless of the society in which an individual lives (Sobreira et al., 2018). Therefore, the meaning attached to food goes beyond its fundamental role in meeting nutritional needs (Civitello, 2008). Nonetheless, it is understood that in order to view food in a way that goes beyond its essential survival role, an individual's basic needs must be met first.

A good illustration of this idea is the application of Abraham Maslow's (1943, 1970) theory of human motivation (also referred to as the human needs hierarchy). Maslow categorized human needs based on both physiological and social criteria. As a result, he was able to create a hierarchy of needs by determining that certain needs were more fundamental than others. Moreover, he also proposed that a person must first achieve a minimum level of satisfaction in one category of needs before progressing to the next higher level of needs fulfilment (Fieldhouse, 1996; Maslow 1943, 1970). Notably, Fieldhouse (1996) has applied Maslow's theory of human motivation in the context of food consumption. Hence, in light of the current study's objective, the following part will further explore the relationship between food consumption and Maslow's model, by relying on Fieldhouse's book: *"Food and Nutrition: Customs and Culture"*.

The theory begins by concentrating on the fundamental physiological needs that drive human behaviour. Therefore, at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy, basic needs are indicated

(Maslow, 1943, 1970). At this level, Fieldhouse (1996) claimed that food is essential for individual existence, regardless of cultural differences in food utilisation. As survival requirements are assured, another set of desires emerges known as safety needs, which are located in the next level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943, 1970). To properly illustrate this pyramid level by associating it with food aspects, instead of asking what can be eaten today, the individual focuses on what will they eat in the next days. In order to satisfy this stage, for instance, food storage can be a solution. In fact, excessive food hoarding beyond near-future requirements is frequent among more privileged households and may be regarded as a type of insecurity (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Interestingly, following the same association between Maslow's concept and food, when survival and safety demands are no longer the most important issues for individuals, eating becomes a mean for them to fulfil their needs for love, belonging, and affection (Fieldhouse, 1996). Maslow (1943, 1970) referred to this stage in his work as the love needs. Food is commonly utilised to address such demands, as seen by its usage as a reward or present, or to signify membership in a specific sociocultural group (Fieldhouse, 1996). The next level in the model concerns esteem needs. People in society require self-esteem and the respect of others. Hence, this set of needs might be divided into two groups. Firstly, is the desire for power, accomplishment, confidence, and independence. Secondly, there is the desire for prestige and the respect and recognition from others (Maslow, 1943, 1970). This may be shown in pride in food preparation, and also in the fact that most individuals like being praised for the quality of the meals they create. At this stage, the focus is on reliability and success, already tried and liked food items are favoured above individual creativity and experimentation (Fieldhouse, 1996). The final and top level of the pyramid is the need for self-actualization. It relates to the desire for personal development, a desire to become actualized in what the individual is possibly capable of (Maslow, 1943, 1970). According to Fieldhouse (1996), as opposed to the level of self-esteem, this one praises the inventive use of foods, novel recipes, and food experiments. That can happen only if a person has self-confidence and is not frightened of failing. Food becomes a personal brand, a source of personal fulfilment and accomplishment. In fact, creative food preparation has long been utilised as a display of individual uniqueness (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Undeniably, it can be understood that the lower stages of Maslow's model represent primarily the biological needs of humans, whereas the upper levels are more concerned with

the social aspects of food. Therefore, keeping in mind the object of the present research, further focus will be put on the social aspects of food in our society. Since food has such a broad and all-encompassing effect on human life, it is incorporated into a wide range of topics (Pilcher, 2012). Human cooking and eating practices carry important cultural and social connotations. It includes everything from who has the right to fish, farm, mill, or harvest the food to the utensils utilized in its preparatory work, the timing and location of meals, the social dynamics that determine seating arrangements, and how close people of different genders, races, or social classes are to certain foods or each other. Moreover, the way food is prepared, who prepares it, and even the sequence in which it is given can all have symbolic meanings and be a reflection of cultural customs (Civitello, 2008).

Fieldhouse (1996), in his book, has also highlighted several social and cultural aspects of food, including cultural cuisines, status, gender, and religion, among many others. The idea of cultural cuisine is preserved by maintaining continuity in a set of culture-specific food practices that include the common use of a basic set of foods, distinctive flavourings, and methods of preparation within a framework of rules surrounding everyday and festive meal traditions. Food habits that are shared contribute to a feeling of belonging; they are an expression of cultural identity and therefore are difficult to give up on (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Civitello (2011) also claimed that food and ethnic or national identity are closely connected and that food is frequently used by groups to demonstrate their distinctive characteristics. The author further emphasized that by examining how average households in seemingly similar cultures differ in their attitudes towards food, nature, and the environment, some insights can emerge through these identity-based differences (Civitello, 2011).

Moreover, food can also indicate social status and political influence. People control their social status in a variety of ways and circumstances. Nevertheless, food has significance in this process because it is associated with concepts such as appetite, taste, and nutrition, which can in fact express ideas of superiority or inferiority in societies (Wiessner & Schiefenhövel, 1996). Hence, it has long been associated with social status and prestige, with certain foods referring to high status to their consumers and certain groups being associated with high-status foods (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Gender is also considered as an important social aspect. Almost every element of the food acquisition process, from production to consumption, shows varying levels of participation

and division of labour between genders. For instance, although this perspective is quite outdated, in traditional societies it was believed that men were responsible for hunting, while women were in charge of preparing and cooking meals (Fieldhouse, 1996). In fact, feminist academics have argued that women's participation in family food preparation – particularly the assumption that women will complete this duty – has been and continues to be a source of oppression for women (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011).

Finally, food symbolism is common in many religions, and food is a key component in different religious events and rituals. Religions' teachings frequently impose restrictions on their followers' food choices, resulting in differing degrees of restrictions on what believers can consume (Fieldhouse, 1996). For instance, the foods that are fit for consumption by Jews are determined by Jewish dietary regulations (also called *kashrut*). It is a complex system with specific prescriptions outlined in Jewish biblical and rabbinical texts. Moreover, these laws address three main categories: food that is forbidden (e.g.: pork), guidelines for religious slaughter, and the restriction on making and eating dairy products and meat at the same time (Havinga, 2010).

Food is undoubtedly integrated into many aspects of our lives (Crowther, 2018; Pilcher, 2012; Sobreira et al., 2018). However, one noticeable component, particularly in the context of dining, is the sense of belonging that comes with sharing meals within social groups (Fieldhouse, 1996; Pilcher, 2012). In this context, it is important to mention the term 'commensality', which in fact refers to the practice of sharing food or dining together with others at the same table. It also suggests that eating together has long been seen as capturing the essence of human sociality. That is, sharing food may be viewed as one of the primary means by which people overcome their basic demands and distinguish themselves from animals (Koponen & Mustonen, 2020). Nonetheless, public eating has developed as a way of expressing both individual and collective identity (Crowther, 2018).

Food is an outstanding symbol for both individuals and social groups due to two connected processes that give it symbolic power. Firstly, food becomes part of an individual's embodiment and serves as a metonym for the self (Pilcher, 2012). Secondly, food has traditionally been enjoyed communally by social groups – in fact, the emergence of solitary eating is a quite recent phenomenon whose popularity has recently started to grow, according to contemporary studies (Koponen & Mustonen, 2020; Pilcher, 2012). Therefore, due to this

collective consumption, food can be a metaphor for ‘we’, as a social group, and occasionally for humankind as a whole. As a result, food becomes a profound symbol of the collective self (Pilcher, 2012). After all, it is a mean to communicate friendliness, ease social interactions, and demonstrate compassion. There is even the expression “where two or more people gather together then let there be food and drink” (Fieldhouse, 1996, p. 78). Most social occasions, or even more official meetings, include food and drink, regardless of whether it is simply coffee and cookies. Food is an ideal way for people to demonstrate their desire for belonging, since it is a global expression of friendliness and hospitality (Fieldhouse, 1996). Consequently, food is closely linked with gathering places, such as restaurants, coffee shops, and pubs, among many others, since food consumption is not just a basic necessity but also serves a social purpose. As a result, today’s dining establishments provide other activities in addition to eating, such as socialisation, hanging out, working, and discussing (Astuti & Hanan, 2016; Fieldhouse, 1996).

In fact, food consumption, which was initially a household activity, has now moved outside the home and has evolved into a leisure activity (Astuti & Hanan, 2016). Hence, restaurants have become an important part of our lives, and dining out is a popular social activity. Everyone needs to eat, thus one of life’s joys is to enjoy nice meals and drinks with companions in comfortable settings. Eating out has become a regular activity, and nowadays, more meals are consumed away from home than ever before (Walker, 2017).

## **2.2 The Birth of Restaurants and Dining Out**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, restaurants have become a natural part of our modern daily lives. Nonetheless, their emergence as part of our historical growth was a key evolutionary step (Akdeniz, 2019). As of today, the term ‘restaurant’ refers to a location where meals may be consumed at various hours of the day, and customers can choose their dishes from a varied menu (Rawson & Shore, 2019; Sloan & Leith, 2003). However, the term’s original meaning could actually be traced back to a French soup vendor in the 1700s (Sloan & Leith, 2003; Walker, 2021). As a matter of fact, the word ‘restaurant’ derives from the word ‘restorative’ and initially, these facilities primarily offered revitalising and medicinal soups for individuals who felt sick (Cracknell & Nobis, 1989; Sloan & Leith, 2003). The evolution of the term ‘restaurant’ from its original 18<sup>th</sup>-century description of a revitalising broth to its present connotation as a trendy and practical place to dine has piqued the interest of cultural

theory and history researchers. According to Sloan and Leith (2003), this is primarily because it represents and encapsulates the modernisation process that defines Western culture today. Restaurants became increasingly diverse as individuals of all socioeconomic groups began dining out for work and pleasure, and women became key clients as well, resulting in more diverse places to visit (Rawson & Shore, 2019). Hence, they have been acknowledged as a component of complicated transitions that have resulted in the modern liberal age. It has been associated with shifts in sensibilities and pleasures; has been viewed as influential in the democratisation of luxury and the spread of fashionability; and has served as both a symbol of civility and a mechanism for spreading the civilising process (Sloan & Leith, 2003). Hence, in order to get a more holistic picture of today's dining culture, the next section will elaborate briefly on the birth of dining out. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the concept of restaurants emerged in many forms in various regions, with no agreed-upon or essential originary point (Crowther, 2018; Rawson & Shore, 2019; Sloan & Leith, 2003). Therefore, the current section will concentrate on the history and development of restaurants, with a special emphasis on both 18<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, which – according to the literature yet consulted – is widely regarded as the birthplace of the modern-day restaurant, and 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century China, which is where the first traces of restaurants were discovered.

In their broad and relevant analysis of ancient dining habits, Rawson and Shore (2019) point out that while individuals in these communities typically ate with the same group of people every day, certain events, such as travel (for job, religion, war, trade), negotiation (business, diplomacy), and celebration, has led to the consumption of food and drink with strangers in public settings. Hence, food and drink consumed by people unrelated to one another were already part of the most ancient communities of which there are records. While it took much longer to create the notion of a restaurant, religious processions, and dishes for special occasions would be transformed to become part of today's restaurant culture. These transitions in practice are the early stages of behaviours that would eventually lead to the features of modern restaurants (Rawson & Shore, 2019).

Today's restaurants evolved from previous taverns, inns, *traiteurs* (cookshops), and boarding houses. Such enterprises provided meal service (along with alcoholic drinks or accommodation) long before the contemporary restaurant with its cook-to-order menu appeared, and therefore are considered the earliest forms of restaurants (Akdeniz, 2019;

Kiefer, 2002; Rawson and Shore, 2019; Sloan & Leith, 2003; Walker, 2021). Taverns generated money primarily from alcohol sales, while inns and boarding houses made money by renting rooms and offering meals (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002; Rawson & Shore, 2019). These establishments served a fixed menu at a fixed price, which we can also refer to as 'table d'hôte'. Furthermore, there was no option for ordering, in fact, there was no ordering at all. Individuals ate what was available from the standard serving. Payment was made for a seat at the table rather than for food ordered or consumed (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002). Visitors often complained about the overall poor quality of dishes, either due to the lack of variety, faulty storage, or incorrect cooking (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002; Rawson & Shore, 2019). Another reason for concern was unpredictable table availabilities – eating times varied from business to business, thus travellers often had to try multiple places in order to have a meal. However, for instance, taverns were different in the sense that they allowed visitors to order items and be charged for only those. This approach was an essential ancestor to the modern-day restaurant. Nonetheless, after the early forms of restaurants, more proper conditions were in place due to the economic growth to expand this approach of dining (Kiefer, 2002).

Additionally, there was also growing pressure for the creation of restaurants, with their private tables, individual orders, variable meal times suited for customers, and pay-per-item purchases (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002). According to Kiefer (2002), the necessity for the growth of such places could be observed from both individuals who needed meals away from home and those who saw the opportunity to fulfil this demand. From the diner's perspective, they wanted to have the opportunity to order, eat, drink, and pay for only and precisely what they consumed at the location. Nevertheless, pressure from the supply side was also strong. For instance, some diners were willing to pay more for more or better food in the table d'hôte concept, while others did not come to the table at all since they did not want to pay for or eat that much. Hence, suppliers had the chance to come up with a more profitable business model (Kiefer, 2002).

The modern-day restaurant is typically attributed to revolutionary Paris. Yet, restaurants existed in other regions long before the French Revolution, when economics and social norms made them possible (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002). As opposed to the previous examples, present-day restaurants are based on services and a variety of choices. These characteristics actually required a millennium to evolve from the first taverns, cookshops,

and inns. Nevertheless, this did not happen first in the West (Rawson & Shore, 2019). In fact, the first restaurants originated in twelfth-century China, which was undergoing a transformation in administrative structure as well as a boom in urban populations (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002; Rawson & Shore, 2019). Rawson and Shore (2019) identified four key reasons why this had previously occurred in Asia and not in the Western world. Firstly, due to size and population. China's Southern Sung dynasty around the 12<sup>th</sup> century was already four times larger than 18<sup>th</sup> century France and some cities already had a population of one million people, whereas Paris had only reached 300,000 people (Kiefer, 2002; Rawson & Shore, 2019). Secondly, the urban Chinese majority had money in the form of small bills or coins. Thirdly, these big cities were vast trading centres that drew people from many ethnicities together. Finally, the fourth factor could be political, and it is related to China's easing of social hierarchies (Rawson & Shore, 2019).

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Hangchow is regarded as the most remarkable example of Asia's first restaurants. Due to its high population, flowing commerce, wealthy environment, and lively urban activities, the city was thought to be an ideal location to open a restaurant (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002). The eating places there had nearly all the characteristics required for a modern restaurant. Customers were given the option of selecting their seats as well as their food from a menu (Akdeniz, 2019). Clients could also request a wide range of foods, including hot, cold, raw, roasted, or grilled meals, among many others (Akdeniz, 2019; Kiefer, 2002). In addition, there were also several kinds of restaurants, such as lower-priced ones, or even places that served meals with respect to the Muslim religion (Akdeniz, 2019). Although restaurants in China had been almost fully formed for nearly a millennium, it was not until 700 years later that they made their way to Europe (Rawson & Shore, 2019).

The emergence of restaurants in Europe can be attributed mainly to France, more specifically Paris, acting as the leading commercial and cultural centre point of the period (Kiefer, 2002; Walker, 2021). It was the ideal place since the country in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the largest and most populated in Western Europe, agriculture was the dominating economic force, and France was also endowed with a fertile land, a moderate climate, and was rich in natural resources (Kiefer, 2002). As previously mentioned, the first restaurants in Paris began to offer broth or '*bouillon*' (also referred to as 'restaurants') produced from boiling meat. Hence, originally, a restaurant was not a location to eat, but rather was a place where unwell individuals may get strength by sipping restorative broths rather than eating. Because the

dish itself was called ‘restaurant’, the establishment was named ‘restaurateur’ (Akdeniz, 2019). Restaurateurs always highlighted the health-related components of their enterprises and even marketed themselves as ‘*maisons de santé*’ (houses of health) (Kiefer, 2002; Rawson & Shore, 2019). In fact, according to various literature, A. Boulanger, a soup vendor is believed to have been the first restaurateur owner, opening his doors in Paris in 1765 (e.g., Walker, 2021).

From the late 1780s, the growth of grand restaurants was seen in Paris, which became the classic model of what a restaurant is. In fact, it was the grand restaurants’ popularity and appeal that in part account for the expansion of restaurants across the world (Rawson & Shore, 2019). It is believed that Monsieur Beauvilliers founded the first grand restaurant, called the Grand Taverne de Londres in 1782, with seating possibilities and individual portions from menus (Cracknell & Nobis, 1989; Walker, 2021). His restaurant was a high-class establishment that quickly gained a reputable name, not only because the meals were good, but also because Beauvilliers had a delightful personality, always greeting his customers by name and remembering their likes and dislikes (Cracknell & Nobis, 1989). It is also believed that as a chef, he revolutionised French cuisine by introducing sauces, stuffing, and a variety of methods formerly available only to the nobles and the emerging upper class (Rawson & Shore, 2019).

By the 1820s, restaurants had become well-formed, catering not just to travellers but also to a new audience who were pleased to dine away from home and enjoy the experience of sitting among strangers, but at their own table. After the fear of the French Revolution, restaurants became a place of pleasure, permitted by the authorities. Eating was no longer a dangerous business. Instead, restaurants have become a location of urban sociability, with the businesses catering to all social classes (Crowther, 2018).

### **2.3 Restaurant Characteristics and Segmentation**

According to Brillat-Savarin (in Crowther, 2018, p.185), “a restaurateur is anyone whose business consists in offering to the public a repast which is always ready, and whose dishes are served in set portions at set prices, on the order of those people who wish to eat them”. He also expressed his early views about restaurant culture, and his commentary can be used to clarify eight basic restaurant traits which differentiate modern restaurants from their earlier versions: a meal can be had at any time that is suitable for the diner, rather than during

scheduled mealtimes; the cost of the dish is known in advance; menus are available, which also define the style of the restaurant; diners can order anything from the menu; separate tables are provided; diners can have separate dishes; restaurants also provide an experience for guests; it has become a business of food with staff and customers (Crowther, 2018).

Although these characteristics might be applicable to all contemporary restaurants, due to the growth of the restaurant industry, several segments could be identified now which differentiate businesses from one another. Food and beverage service establishments can be categorized in a variety of ways. According to Davis et al. (2018), it could be classified based on the name, food type, business format, or service, among many other factors, just to name a few. Nevertheless, one of the primary restaurant segmentation distinguishes four groups based primarily on the service provided. This includes fine dining, casual dining, fast casual and, finally, quick-service restaurants (Lekstutyte, 2016).

It is important to highlight that fine and casual dining falls under the umbrella of full-service restaurants. Full-service restaurants provide more of a formal dining experience, with customers seated at tables and waiting staff taking their orders and providing table service. The team in these restaurants is larger, as it includes kitchen personnel, hostesses, waiters, and bartenders (Lekstutyte, 2016). Fine dining applies to the cuisine and service offered at restaurants where the service, drink, and food are costly and typically leisurely (Walker, 2021). The greatest chefs, well-trained servers, and exceptional dishes served with deep knowledge of food and wine increase the attractiveness of such places. In addition, distinctive and pleasant décor, lighting, and music create the mood for an exquisite and unique experience (Lekstutyte, 2016). Hence, fine dining restaurants are meant to be different from conventional restaurants in every way, including a higher level of costs, superior standards and a pleasant ambience and atmosphere (Shahzadi et al., 2018). Casual dining restaurants provide full service, but the experience is less unique, and these restaurants are more popular due to lower costs. The guests are seated at tables, skilled waiters explain menu options and take orders, but the service approach is not as formal as in fine dining establishments. Just like in fine dining, they might specialise in one sort of cuisine, however, the food presentation and preparation methods are not as spectacular (Lekstutyte, 2016). Therefore, casual dining is more common since it corresponds to the current societal trend of a more relaxed lifestyle (Walker, 2021).

Fast casual (also referred to as quick-casual or limited-service) restaurants are a combination of full-service and quick-service establishments. According to Lekstutyte (2016), they provide better cuisine and a more pleasant ambience than quick-service restaurants, yet they are less expensive than full-service restaurants. The primary aim of the service is speed and convenience; nevertheless, the service is often restricted to the service counter, where consumers make their meal selections while waiting in line and then pay the cashier (Lekstutyte, 2016). In fact, fast casual restaurants are on the rise, with new concepts popping up on a regular basis (Walker, 2021).

Finally, quick-service restaurants prioritise speed and convenience. This segment comprises all restaurants where food is paid before service. People place their orders at a brightly lit counter with colourful images of menu items and pricing (Walker, 2021). The costs of the meals are inexpensive, and the menus are also full of unique recommendations. Moreover, the atmosphere of the restaurants is generally basic, and the décor is minimalistic (Lekstutyte, 2016).

## **2.4 Brunch Restaurants**

Considering the objective of the present research, it is critical to briefly examine the term of brunch and brunch restaurants. Hence, the following section will explore the origins and features of brunch, laying the groundwork for the methodological part of this study.

The term 'brunch' comes from the combination of the words 'breakfast' and 'lunch' (Martins, 2018). Just as its name refers, it is the mixture of the two concepts and is typically associated with a proper meal consisting of a range of dishes combining foods and beverages suitable for both breakfast and lunch (Peters-Desteract, 2020; Ternikar, 2014). According to the Oxford English Dictionary and Punch magazine, the term may be traced back to Guy Beringer's 1895 article "*Brunch: A Plea*" in the British journal *Hunter's Weekly* (George, 2021; Hartley, 2021; Martins, 2018; Ternikar, 2014). The article also mentioned the practice of a 'Hunter's breakfast', a late-morning meal popular among English aristocrats. Hunter's breakfasts became quite similar to what is now called brunch (Ternikar, 2014). According to Beringer's writings, it would make Saturday night drinkers' lives easier by eliminating the need to wake up early on Sunday (Hartley, 2021; Ternikar, 2014). It would also increase human pleasure in other ways: it improves your mood, helps you feel good about yourself and others, and washes away the week's anxieties (Szabó, 2020; Ternikar, 2014). Hence, the

concept of brunch is said to have originated in Britain. Nonetheless, as it gained popularity in both New Orleans and New York City, brunch actually has become more of an American ritual (Ellison, 2022; Martins, 2018; Ternikar, 2014). Brunching had become a sign of class by the 1920s, and by the 1950s, it had evolved into a symbol of comfort and convenience (Ternikar, 2014).

In recent decades, it has been redefined as a meal of both comfort and casual entertaining, as well as a time for extravagant and luxurious dining (Ellison, 2022; Ternikar, 2014). Brunch gives a chance to relax, calm down, and enjoy magnificent cuisine, whether it is a casual brunch out to catch up with friends or a holiday brunch to connect with family (Ellison, 2022; Future Food Strategy Group, 2018; Ternikar 2014). Therefore, as of today, it has become a postmodern symbol of gastronomic luxury and comfort food at the same time (Ternikar, 2014). Moreover, a market report conducted by Mintel (2022) about restaurant breakfast and brunch trends revealed that although people's daily routines and purchasing habits have lately altered dramatically, the majority of breakfast eaters are keeping or even increasing their involvement, demonstrating that morning eating habits are difficult to change. It could also be due to the fact that breakfast and brunch restaurants are considered to be relatively more affordable than lunch and dinner places, and therefore are less sensitive to rising prices. This implies that breakfast/brunch restaurants may be a viable market for operators to maintain or boost traffic (Mintel, 2022). Future Food Strategy Group (2018) also claimed that the price ranges of brunch places often align with a casual rather than a high-end experience, which makes them more affordable and accessible for customers. Nonetheless, while breakfast events are becoming more popular, there is still plenty of space to increase morning visitors and orderings. It is crucial to highlight that diners are still more than twice as likely to have lunch or dinner outside of home. Yet, more than half of Generation Z and Millennials reported having breakfast at food service facilities more frequently this year, while just roughly a quarter of Generation X and older individuals reported doing so (Mintel, 2022). As a matter of fact, it is believed that the Millennials, who prioritize dining out and spending money on experiences rather than material possessions, have been one of the main driving forces behind the brunch revolution (Future Food Strategy Group, 2018). Therefore, brunch is an ideal opportunity for this generation and their younger followers, Gen Z, to fulfil their demands and food service brands may establish a loyal customer base among them (Future Food Strategy Group, 2018; Mintel, 2022).

In regard to the selection of brunch restaurants, there is a need to emphasize again that it is a meal between late breakfast and lunch, and as such, it frequently includes items that are primarily associated with both meals (Ellison, 2022; Peters-Desteract, 2020; Ternikar, 2014; Traster, 2018). Brunch menus frequently include heavier breakfast items as well as lunch entrées, sandwiches, or salads. Because brunch is often used to replace two meals, the menu items are usually richer and provide bigger proportions than those found on a standard breakfast menu (Traster, 2018). To demonstrate it with examples, a typical brunch menu usually offers dishes such as poached eggs, omelettes, waffles, pancakes or French toasts just to name a few (Ellison, 2022; Traster, 2018). Furthermore, it may include heartier meat dishes as well, such as steak and eggs or corned beef hash. In terms of lunch options, diners can choose from hot sandwiches, salads or other simple entrées. Desserts are also usually offered and can be found under a separate heading or menu (Traster, 2018). In plus, alcoholic beverages are common components of brunch meals, as opposed to standard breakfast menus. For instance, champagne, mimosas, and Bloody Marys are popular, but there are many other options as well (Ellison, 2022; Hartley, 2021; Traster, 2018). Nonetheless, restaurants that have brunch menus always widen their meal offerings beyond standard breakfast items. Brunch is an ideal opportunity for food innovation and experimentation, allowing businesses to test out new dishes and attract visitors looking for new culinary experiences (Ellison, 2022; Future Food Strategy Group, 2018). In fact, the exciting and creative nature of brunch meals frequently makes it difficult to resist the urge to photograph the meals before eating (Future Food Strategy Group, 2018). Hartley (2021) has also claimed that brunch provides exquisite photo opportunities, especially in today's world where food pictures are trending on social media platforms.

## **2.5 The Current Restaurant Industry**

According to a study from a consultancy company (SkyQuest Technology Consulting Pvt. Ltd., 2022), as of today, the global food service market was valued at USD 2,325 billion in 2021 and is anticipated to exceed USD 4,676.91 billion by 2028. This corresponds to an annual growth rate of over 10.5% during the forecast period from 2022 to 2028. Therefore, the restaurant industry is clearly growing, but also undergoing transformations. Customer tastes are shifting, and new technologies are revolutionising the market. To maintain a competitive advantage, restaurant owners and operators must be aware of these

developments and how they will affect their operations (SkyQuest Technology Consulting Pvt. Ltd., 2022).

Nonetheless, it is critical to emphasise that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the restaurant industry's current outlook. Since 2020, the world has been dealing with an unprecedented global health crisis in the form of COVID-19 (Lee et al., 2023). This pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy, with the hospitality industry being especially affected due to its sensitivity to various government-mandated restrictions (such as social distancing, gathering limits, travel restrictions, and so on) imposed to help control the virus's spread (Alotaibi & Khan, 2022; Gomes et al., 2022; Lee et al, 2023). It is also crucial to highlight that the hospitality industry is vital to the global economy since it directly and indirectly employs millions of people. Hence, the pandemic has resulted in the sector laying off millions of workers and probable revenue losses of billions of dollars (Alotaibi & Khan, 2022).

Specifically speaking about the restaurant industry, businesses have been significantly affected by a variety of economic factors, including business closures, workforce reduction, rising costs due to decreased demand, raised bank loans, rise in company bankruptcies, financial vulnerability, and reduced dining room capacity as a result of public health measures (Gomes et al, 2022). In order to demonstrate the severe impact on the market by numbers, the National Restaurant Association conducted a survey of 6,000 restaurant operators in the US and discovered that by the end of 2020, the industry's total sales were USD 240 billion lower than sales prior to the global crisis, and more than 110,000 restaurants had closed either temporarily or permanently (Lee et al., 2023).

According to Madeira et al. (2021), restaurants can experience internal crises caused by difficulties such as bad management, poor service, and low-quality items, or external crises caused by economic, political, and health issues. Internal crises might be solved in-house; however, external crises are frequently beyond the control of restaurant owners, who must rely on government assistance and measures to navigate and overcome such obstacles (Madeira et al., 2021). Furthermore, even though there have been other worldwide crises that have had a significant impact on the hospitality sector, such as the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) health crisis in 2003 or the subprime economy of 2008, the current crisis has distinct features, as there was a mandatory lockdown, which has never

occurred before (Gössling et al., 2021; Madeira et al., 2021). Therefore, in order to survive, several restaurants had to take major steps to adapt to the current situation. For instance, they modified not just their menu but also their service technique, offering contact-free takeaway deals and delivery choices, among many others (Walker, 2021).

Just as the case of the pandemic represents, the restaurant industry has always faced significant and dramatic market developments and is sensitive not only to seasonality but also to other natural risks (Gomes et al., 2022; Ivkov et al., 2016). Acevedo (2022) even referred to restaurants as businesses that are part of an ever-changing and complex sector. Nevertheless, it was clear that the restaurant businesses that survived the pandemic crisis were adaptive and flexible, not afraid to make adjustments and rapidly adopt new methods of conducting business (Dahlberg, 2021). Hence, for restaurants, it will be key in the future to be agile and adaptable, willing to innovate when needed (Chaar, 2022).

Nonetheless, Ivkov et al. (2016) argued that due to the numerous aspects that impact consumers' experiences, innovation in this market is a complex and multifaceted process. Innovation must be addressed from a variety of viewpoints, including human resources, pricing management, customer satisfaction management, food safety management, marketing, design, ecology, and so on. Restaurants are locations where people go to dine, interact, conduct business, and have a one-of-a-kind experience. Hence, flexibility is essential for creating a valuable experience in the restaurant industry (Ivkov et al., 2016).

In order to succeed as innovators in the restaurant industry, establishments must remain aware of current customer trends. By reviewing several reports on current and future market trends, such as *Restaurant Industry 2030* by the National Restaurant Association (2019), *2023 Dining Trends Report* by TouchBistro (2023), or *Trends and Tactics: How to Navigate the Changing Landscape of the European Restaurant Industry* by Merckaert (2023b), the present dissertation identified four trends that play critical roles in the restaurant industry known today: technology, health-consciousness, sustainability, and unique experiences.

The digital revolution of the food and beverage industry has been a long time in the making, with the pandemic accelerating the process (Merckaert, 2023a). According to research conducted by the National Restaurant Association (2019), technology and data will play the most important roles in the restaurant industry's future development. As probably most of the restaurants are already experiencing it, we are quickly approaching a restaurant business

that will completely utilize technology by 2030. Customers are expected to demand that restaurants integrate technology into their operations, and failure to do so may result in a decline in business. As of today, they are already engaging with restaurants digitally, and therefore the industry will need to continue adapting to these demands (National Restaurant Association, 2019).

Consequently, the food and beverage sector can no longer afford to ignore technology and innovation, which is a necessity to remain relevant and competitive (EHL Insights, n.d.). The following examples of technological trends will highlight some of the main innovations in the restaurant industry. Even after the pandemic, restaurants continue to rely heavily on online food ordering and ‘no touch’ home delivery services. Hence, third-party food delivery services will continue to be important tools for businesses that do not have in-house meal ordering and delivery services. Yet, as more customers prefer ordering straight from restaurants, probably more will invest in establishing their own applications and online platforms. (EHL Insights, n.d.). Over 13% of customers said they would skip a restaurant that did not provide online delivery. In fact, by 2030, global food ordering is estimated to exceed USD 365 billion (Merckaert, 2023a).

Moreover, contactless payment should also be one of the first digital transformation efforts to be adopted. It is significant, given that 55% of customers consider contactless payment to be one of the top three determining factors when selecting a restaurant (Merckaert, 2023a). The possibility of online table reservations has also become important nowadays. Besides the convenience for customers, online table reservation systems allow restaurants to manage waitlists, seating, dining preferences, and customer loyalty (EHL Insights, n.d.). That being said, the availability of the restaurant’s menu online is equally essential for diners today. Before picking a restaurant, 84% of guests look up the menu online. Therefore, in 2023, having an easily scannable menu online will be standard practice for the majority of businesses (Merckaert, 2023a). In plus, restaurant menus are gradually being replaced by QR codes (EHL Insights, n.d.). They have several advantages for restaurant businesses, including not having the need to print, saving waiters time from giving and collecting menus, allowing easy editing of items, and also providing guests assurance that they are not touching previously handled menus (Owner, n.d.).

The employment of technology in restaurants is not an entirely new concept, but looking into the future, the possibilities get even more advanced and may transform dining experiences forever. One of the technologies which is expected to revolutionize the industry is robotics. Robots in restaurants are becoming increasingly frequent as technologies such as AI and IoT gain recognition (Tulsian, 2021). As a result of these technologies, customers today may now dine in a restaurant where they will be served by robots, which convey meals from the kitchen to the tables using lasers and cameras. However, robots can be used in restaurants to not only carry food, but also to automate prep lines to increase kitchen efficiency (McDonaldPaper, 2022).

Moreover, the Metaverse has become the newest tool for restaurants to use in order to re-establish their customer base and develop novel dining experiences for the public (Vergidis, 2022). The Metaverse is a technology that generates a virtual environment in which people may interact with one another via digital avatars, thereby replicating the real-world experience in a virtual context (Bhatia, 2022). For instance, Chipotle recently launched a virtual restaurant on the Roblox gaming platform and distributed promotional codes for real-world burritos (McDonaldPaper, 2022; Vergidis, 2022). The game's name was Chipotle Burrito Builder and by rolling burritos, players could receive a virtual currency known as Burrito Bucks. Afterwards, the first 100,000 gamers who rolled a burrito on National Burrito Day could trade their virtual currency for a real-life Chipotle (Lalley, 2022; Upson, 2022; Vergidis, 2022). Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that despite the potential benefits of this kind of technology in the restaurant industry, some remain sceptical and question whether technology could totally replicate dining experiences due to the sector's complexity and need for interpersonal interaction (Tonon, 2022).

Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in customers' interest in health and wellness (Georgiev, n.d; Owner, n.d.). Regarding this matter, it is crucial to mention the necessity today for restaurants to adapt their businesses according to customers' expectations and needs. Undoubtedly, the customer takes priority in the management plan for the company's successful operation, which means that the goal of restaurant businesses is to truly understand the customer in order to provide products and services that fulfil their needs and aspirations (Kasambu & Sritharan, 2018). Hence, the increased preference regarding health prompted the industry to respond to this trend by developing menu options that also appeal to health-conscious individuals (Georgiev, n.d.; Khan et al., 2020). The

demand for unprocessed whole foods is increasing as the population develops more chronic illnesses and individuals educate themselves on the advantages of nutritious eating (Owner, n.d.). Furthermore, younger generations are more willing to spend extra for healthy meals that include ‘buzzwords’ like all-natural, organic, and GMO-free. Vegan food is also becoming a popular trend and many restaurants are catching up with it (Georgiev, n.d.). Consequently, contemporary restaurants will be expected to be innovative and creative regarding healthy and nutritious dishes. It is also likely that more customers will have dietary restrictions such as vegetarian, gluten-free, lactose-free or paleo among many others and operators will need to provide more alternatives to accommodate special diets (National Restaurant Association, 2019; Wasserstrom, 2019). According to research conducted by the National Restaurant Association (2019), as expected developments by 2030, restaurants are likely to become more creative and imaginative in making healthier meals, offering more alternatives to suit special diets, and supplying food and beverage items with lower added sugars. Nonetheless, it is also important to note, that offering healthier meal alternatives may attract a more varied clientele and attract guests who may otherwise avoid visiting (Owner, n.d.).

However, trends in the restaurant sector do not exclusively have to be about cuisine or service. It is the environment, which has become one of the most recent concerns, that has caused customer changes in the food and beverage market (Euler, 2022; Georgiev, n.d.; Voicu, 2023). Environmentally friendly activities have grown in the recent decade and are expected to grow even faster in the upcoming years (National Restaurant Association, 2019). In order to be more sustainable, restaurants need to consider recycling initiatives, sustainably sourced products, energy-efficient equipment and even eco-friendly designs. Since food deliveries are also a crucial part of today’s industry, restaurants will also need to consider environmentally friendly packaging (Burton-Hughes, 2020; National Restaurant Association, 2019; Voicu, 2023). In fact, 43% of diners would be willing to pay more to fund restaurants’ sustainability measures, and some customers indicated they would not order if sustainable packaging alternatives were not available (Merckaert, 2023a.). Additionally, since sustainability is becoming a growing concern among customers, promoting environmentally friendly practices will be an important aspect of a restaurant’s marketing activities (National Restaurant Association, 2019).

Nevertheless, the social aspect of sustainability should also be mentioned. It concerns initiatives like aiding the local community, establishing appropriate relationships with community members, guests, employees, or suppliers, and complying with ethical standards (Božić & Milošević, 2021). Over the last few years, the value of a restaurant being socially responsible has grown across all generations (McCain Foods, 2021). According to The Restaurant Times (2022), researchers reported that over 77% of consumers worldwide prefer purchasing goods from socially responsible businesses, and even in the restaurant industry, they are willing to spend 5-10% more due to the brand's devotion to the community.

In fact, restaurants may take numerous steps to become more socially responsible, which benefits both their surroundings and their reputation. This could include sourcing products locally and seasonally to support local farmers and communities; or even supporting social causes through donations for charities or partnerships with organizations which tackle issues such as food insecurity or hunger (Khachatryan, 2023). In addition, nowadays customers also expect restaurants to address issues of equality and diversity, as well as their commitment to create a society that is more inclusive and fair (McCain Foods, 2021).

Finally, although the pandemic could have increased takeaway and delivery, it is evident that customers still enjoy the experience of dining in. According to a study conducted by TouchBistro (2023), ordering food at home has never been easier; nevertheless, most diners agree that it cannot replace the full experience of going out to restaurants. One of the participants of the research even claimed the following: "I prefer dining in. I just feel like the whole experience is better. Usually the food is better because you're sitting down there. They're serving it to you, it's presented" (TouchBistro, 2023, p. 11). Another study also revealed that 68% of the participants would rather spend money on an experience of going to a restaurant, than on a purchase from a store (National Restaurant Association, 2022). Hence, it is clear that following years of imposed social distance, individuals are more eager than ever to rediscover human contact, and are ready to share, explore, and experiment (TheFork, 2022). Visiting a restaurant is not only about the food; people also go out to socialize and have an enjoyable experience. However, to provide an authentic restaurant experience, restaurateurs need to fully comprehend their guests' expectations. In addition to serving consistent, high-quality food, there are several other aspects to consider, such as using suitable chinaware, playing appropriate music, ensuring the right lighting, and even the outlook of plates can impact the guests' experiences (Merckaert, 2023b).

In conclusion, the world of food and food service undeniably plays a crucial role in humans' everyday lives. The restaurant sector has evolved greatly throughout history, gradually evolving from viewing food service as a basic necessity to more of a leisure time activity, where customers may have a unique experience and do not just come for the meal. In fact, just as unique experiences were highlighted as a vital trend, nowadays the appearance of the food and the presentation of the table are more crucial than ever in attracting new customers and providing them with a pleasant and aesthetically pleasing eating experience (TheFork, 2022). Hence, the following chapter will elaborate on the importance of plating and visual aesthetics in dining experiences.

### **3. The Visual Presentation of Food**

The upcoming chapter's objective is to provide an in-depth examination of the visual presentation of food and the art of plating. The section will begin by demonstrating the growing importance of this topic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to justify the reason for investigation. Afterwards, it discusses how sensory science impacts food perception, with a special emphasis on sight. Furthermore, the chapter will continue with an overview of the history of plating, highlighting the most significant events and people in the field. Finally, the chapter will conclude by delving into the visual cues and components of plating to showcase the newest trends with special attention to colour, shape, balance, and position.

#### **3.1 The Growing Importance of Aesthetic Plating**

*"We eat first with our eyes."* (Apicius in Spence et al., 2016, p. 53; Delwiche, 2012)

The well-known expression, allegedly coined by the Roman gourmand Apicius in the first century AD, has recently been supported by numerous scientific studies demonstrating its relevance in today's world (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Michel et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2016). Visual compositions of plates are becoming increasingly important since findings suggest that presenting food in an aesthetically pleasing way can improve the overall enjoyment of the meal (Cifci et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2014). Therefore, plating should not be viewed as a mere decoration tool but also as a component of a complex dining experience, which today plays a critical role in the creative processes in the kitchen and people's food preferences (Cifci et al., 2021).

The growing significance of this trend could also be due to the rapid increase in digital interfaces and audiovisual media in recent years. Individuals now have constant access to digital screens in their daily lives thanks to the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and other electronic devices (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Spence et al., 2016). As a result, not only have these technologies increased the exposure of digital images of food, but they have also increased the desire of users to share images of the meals they are about to eat with their social media networks (Spence et al., 2016). Adam Hyman, a restaurant consultant has also confirmed that perhaps more than ever, the appearance of food is crucial. "I'm sure some restaurants are preparing food now that is going to look good on Instagram" (Adam Hyman in Saner, 2019, para. 4; Spence et al., 2016). Moreover, statistics yielded the same findings.

It was discovered by researchers that a large portion of images shared on Instagram is related to food, with approximately 85% of all photos featuring food content, as well as 208 million posts with the hashtag ‘food’ (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Spence et al., 2022). In fact, the famous expression indicated in the beginning has also been re-phrased as ‘camera eats first’ to indicate how posting pictures of meals and sharing them on social media while eating out at restaurants has grown in popularity as a fundamental part of people’s experiences (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Wachyuni & Yusuf, 2021; Yong et al., 2020). Therefore, it is no surprise that nowadays people frequently choose restaurants by browsing images of food shared by other customers on social media. Similarly, in order to increase user engagement, restaurants also proactively implement more image-driven social media strategies, which might include sharing pictures of the plates on their social media accounts as well as websites (Gambetti & Han, 2022).

Nevertheless, before diving into the world of food plating, it is crucial to define the most basic and important concepts related to the field. Plating, in simple terms, refers to “both the preparation and presentation of food on a plate”, with the two primary goals of visual and sensual attraction (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017, p. 236). The notion of food aesthetics is also closely related to the visual presentation of food. Food aesthetics indicate the sensorial culinary encounter provided by meal presentation techniques such as plating and decorating. In fact, food aesthetics has been widely recognized in the culinary world as the art of dish presentation, implying that the visual aspect of food is just as important as the flavour itself (Gambetti & Han, 2022). Furthermore, when speaking about the word aesthetics, it is frequently connected to fine arts and notions like “beauty, the senses, the sensation of pleasantness, and artistic values” (Paakki et al., 2019, p. 1). It is also claimed that traditionally, it refers to non-functional objects without any practical purpose and is more concerned with the feel and look of objects’ surfaces (Sikorski, 2012). Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that functional purposes, even if hidden beneath the surfaces, are required in today’s world. Therefore, there are two ways in which aesthetics can be described. Firstly, the traditional idea of aesthetics, which relates to fine arts and beauty, so rather something exceptional. Secondly, there is the idea that emphasises the utility and practicality of aesthetics; that believes something cannot be beautiful if it is not useful at all (Paakki et al., 2019). Hence, there is a clear tension between the surface and functionality. This is also true when it comes to food plating. The goal is to find a balance between the functional features

of cooking and flavour, and the appearance, the visual appeal of presentation (Sikorski, 2012). It is crucial, since a meal in a restaurant should not only look good, but should also taste well. The plate has to provide a meaningful experience not only in the first moment when customers look at the food, but during the entire process when they eat the dish (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017).

### **3.2 The Role of Sensory Science in Food Perception**

Sensory science plays a crucial role in understanding the complex process of food perception (Schifferstein et al., 2020). From the initial taste and smell to the visual appeal and texture, the way food is perceived and experienced can greatly impact the overall enjoyment of the meal and the memories that are associated with it (Costa Verde, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020). Hence, the present section will explore the connection between food perception and sensory science, delving into the various ways in which our senses interact with food with special attention on visual perception.

Sensory science is a multidisciplinary area that studies the measurement, interpretation, and comprehension of people's reactions to product attributes as experienced by the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch (Damsbo-Svendsen et al., 2020; Martens, 1999; Stone & Sidel, 2004; Watson, 1992). Moreover, sensory assessment in relation to the food and beverage industry is a scientific approach for measuring, analysing, and interpreting reactions to the properties of meals perceived by the senses (Martens, 1999). Individuals' sense organs, such as the eyes, ears, or skin, allow the brain to perceive and process information from the environment (Horská & Berčík, 2017). These perceptions can significantly influence people's emotions and ultimately shape their decisions, particularly regarding consumer behaviour (Horská & Berčík, 2017; Kang et al.; 2011). Therefore, it is important to take the senses into account when trying to appeal to customers and create positive experiences (Horská & Berčík, 2017).

However, food items are considered to be a special category of consumer goods in which the sensory experience during use includes all five senses (Schifferstein et al., 2020). In fact, the perception of food is a more complex process, and it relies on the interplay of all senses. This phenomenon is also referred to as the cross-modality of the senses (Campo et al., 2017). It suggests the interplay between them, highlighting that there is much more complexity and interconnectedness than previously thought (Spence, 2017). Historically, scientists believed

that each sense operated independently, with visual input being processed by the visual brain, auditory input by the auditory brain, and so on (Groeger, 2013; Spence, 2017). However, recent research has revealed that there are far more connections between the senses than previously thought and that altering one sense can have a significant influence on the perception of another sense (Kravchyk, 2022; Spence, 2017). This can be seen in everyday examples such as how the colour of lighting can modify the overall taste of food (Spence, 2017).

Nonetheless, Spence (2017) noted that this phenomenon is sometimes mistaken with the concept of multisensory. In contrast, the term multisensory refers to the phenomenon of multiple senses working together in the brain to create a cohesive and holistic perception of an experience. For example, when you are eating crispy food, the sound of the crunch you hear as you bite into it, along with the sensation of the texture in your mouth, are integrated into your brain to form a multisensory perception of the freshness and crispness of the food. In this case, both the auditory and touch senses play a role in the overall experience of the food item and are perceived as a unified whole by the brain (Spence, 2017).

As it was previously mentioned, the consumption of food is a fundamental human experience that engages all senses. Therefore, a brief look at all five senses is crucial in order to have a more coherent understanding of the sensory experience of food. Nonetheless, since this research concerns the art of plating, particular focus will be placed on sight and visual perception.

The sense of taste is a fundamental aspect of human experiences, and it is triggered when individuals insert food products into their mouths. It is mediated by specialized cells called taste receptor cells. These cells are typically located in taste buds that are spread over the surface of the tongue, with many of them grouped in structures known as papillae (Lewis, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020). The taste receptor cells are designed to detect different taste qualities such as sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and savoury which is also referred to as umami (Kravchyk, 2022; Lewis, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that taste buds only account for about 20% of the whole experience of taste (Kravchyk, 2022).

The sense of smell, also known as olfaction, is the most complex of the five senses, with the most distinct receptor types. Olfactory receptors form a huge gene family in the genome,

with estimates suggesting that there are about 1000 olfactory genes, out of which only about one-third are functional. This translates to around 350 distinct olfactory receptor types that enable humans to perceive a wide range of smells (Axel, 1995; Schifferstein et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning that many people overlook the significance of the sense of smell in food experience since they attribute many smells to the sense of taste (Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence, 2015). However, the sense of taste is restricted to a few basic sensations perceived by receptors in the mouth. Hence, many other smells that people associate with taste are actually perceived by the sense of smell. As a result, the emphasis people place on tasting may be overstated when compared to the importance of smelling (Axel, 1995; Schifferstein et al., 2020). In fact, it is believed that between 75% and 95% of what individuals normally perceive as taste is actually derived from the sense of smell (Spence, 2015).

The sense of touch also has significance in the experience of food perception. Individuals are able to sense the size and weight of food in their mouths, experience texture when they bite and chew, detect temperature, and even feel burning or tickling sensations (Kravchyk, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Each of such touch sensations is transferred to the brain through the so-called trigeminal nerves, which are located in the oral cavity, jaw, teeth, and tongue (Schifferstein et al., 2020). The various touch sensations can also have a significant influence on the overall perception of the food. Furthermore, when discussing food, it is common to refer to its ‘mouthfeel’ – the way the food feels when it is in your mouth (Mouritsen & Styrbæk, 2016; Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). These characteristics might involve, for instance, soft, hard, crunchy, smooth, or gummy, among many others (Schifferstein et al., 2020).

People may underestimate the importance of hearing. Nonetheless, while the influence of sound on food perception may not be apparent right away, it plays a role in many encounters that also involve the sense of touch (Kravchyk, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020). The fizziness of soft beverages, the crunchiness of cookies, or the crispness of potato chips could all be examples of this (Kravchyk, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020; Zampini & Spence, 2004). In fact, various studies and experiments have shown that auditory input can affect food perception. For instance, research has shown that when the sound level of biting and chewing is raised, or when only the high-frequency noises are highlighted, potato chips are considered as crisper and fresher. Therefore, sounds may also be employed in a variety of

ways to enhance the dining experience (Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014; Zampini & Spence, 2004).

A growing body of research, including numerous neuroimaging experiments, has shed light on the significant impact that vision has on our food behaviour. These studies emphasize the central role that visual cues play in the food selection process and highlight the importance of sight in shaping our food choices (Spence et al., 2014). The visual system is thought to be the first guide when it comes to food selection, since in a matter of moments, the brain makes a determination about the appeal and nutritional worth of the viewed foods (Campo et al., 2017; Spence, 2017). Research has also revealed that when presented with visually tempting food, the brain shows activity across a number of areas, including those for taste and reward processing (Spence, 2017). In fact, sight is widely considered to be the most dominant of the human senses as it plays a major role in gathering information about our surroundings (Horská & Berčík, 2017; Wade & Swanston, 2013). Most of our knowledge about any object, location, and movement comes from the sense of vision. As a dominant sense, vision processes the light that enters the eyes and transforms it into information about the world. The understanding of what things are, where they are, and how they are is primarily derived from vision (Wade & Swanston, 2013). Hence, the significance of visual information should not be underestimated (Horská & Berčík, 2017).

However, it is critical to have a basic understanding of how visual perception works in the human body. The eye, located at the front of the skull, is a movable organ with muscles that enable it to focus on objects. Though often thought to be the source of vision, the eyes are simply the receptors for visual stimuli from the environment and surroundings (Castro et al., 2021). All objects in a person's surroundings emit or reflect light with varying intensities that enter the eye through the pupil. After the brain analyses the light and information collected by the eyes, visual perception occurs (Castro et al., 2021; Cleveland Clinic, 2021; Vasković, 2023). Nonetheless, Castro et al. (2021) highlighted that the process involves the brain constructing and forming a subjective interpretation of what a person sees based on their own personal biases and past experiences. This means that what is actually seen through the eyes may not necessarily match what is ultimately perceived. The eyes provide a certain level of input, but the brain plays a significant role in processing and shaping the final perception. As a result, visual perception is essentially a complex process of interpretation

and reconstruction, where the brain creates its own unique understanding of the visual information received (Castro et al., 2021; Shimojo et al., 2001).

Based on this perspective, it is clear that what people see has a significant impact on their perception of food and drink (Michel et al., 2014). The presentation of a meal should be considered a priority since it may influence customers' preferences and purchasing willingness (Campo et al., 2017). Moreover, several visual characteristics might be considered when speaking about food plating, which can determine the attractiveness of a dish. These might include shape, colour, surface texture, quantity, or size among many others. Many studies have examined this phenomenon, by experimenting on different visual cues of plates. For instance, dishes plated in a more artistic way are often favoured over conventional ones, and guests are willing to give a higher price for them. Moreover, neat presentations and linear ingredient arrangements can also enhance the dining experience. Therefore, an attractive presentation can lead to increased enjoyment of the dish (Schifferstein et al., 2020). The most essential visual properties when it comes to the presentation of food will be discussed in further depth, in the section on the visual cues of plating (see sub-chapter 3.4).

### **3.3 The Art of Plating: A Brief History**

Based on the research developed in this dissertation, it seems that relatively little research has been done on the cultural history of plates and plating, compared to the studies of eating. Moreover, research in art history does not provide many insights, as it tends to focus on iconography and social history rather than on the aesthetic design and relationship to the cooking techniques of the plates themselves (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017). Nonetheless, this section will attempt to explore the history of plating, by primarily relying on the works of Deroy et al.'s (2014) article called '*The plating manifesto (I): from decoration to creation*' and Meulen and Wiesel's (2017) chapter titled '*Plating Food. On the Pictorial Arrangement of Cuisine on the Plate*' from the book '*Culinary Turn*'. Both of the chosen works provide valuable context about the historical developments of food plating and highlight the most significant historical moments and figures that shaped the way plating is done today.

Although plates and plate arrangements have been used since Antiquity, the distinct accumulation of food in a container or on a plate still remained in place. It was not until the development of the modern era, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when people started to make

the first bigger steps towards different plate arrangements (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017). Nevertheless, the earliest known example of plating as an art form is actually found in the centuries-old Japanese tradition of Kaiseki (Deroy et al., 2014). It is a well-known traditional multi-course cuisine, which enables chefs to prepare sets of small dishes that capture the essence of the natural environment through the use of fresh seasonal ingredients. This method emphasizes the use of flavours, textures, appearance, aroma, and colour of food to reflect the changes of seasons (Lan et al., 2012; Sushiya Sansaro, 2023). The final dishes are carefully presented on specific plates to enhance their appearance and align with the seasonal theme of the meal (Lan et al., 2012; Yu & Sealy, 2016). In fact, Kaiseki cuisine is regarded as the ultimate gourmet living experience and is considered to be among the greatest in luxury Japanese cuisine today (Lan et al., 2012). Undoubtedly, as this example proves, Japanese culture has had a significant impact on modern gastronomy. The simplest way to showcase this is to highlight the contrast of what existed in Western cultures back in the time (Deroy et al., 2014).

During the Middle Ages, plating and plateware held primarily functional significance in the West. For the majority of society, serving meals basically meant pouring porridge or stew into plates which were hollowed out from old loaves of bread (Deroy et al., 2014; Park, 2013; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Nevertheless, when speaking about royalty in medieval times, it could be observed that the presentation of food had greater importance. Plating was more extravagant, with largely meat-based meals with a variety of garnishes, fruits, and sauces stacked on huge trays or plates (Deroy et al., 2014; Park, 2013). Nevertheless, Deroy et al. (2014) highlighted that the eye-catching way of plating was mostly to distract people's attention from the lack of flavours of the items themselves. In fact, the desire for colour was favoured above the actual flavour of the meals. For instance, to indicate social status, yellow and green would be employed. The animals served for the king and officials of the royal palace might be decorated with gold leaf. Moreover, some chefs would even strive to make the animals they served appear to be alive, frequently keeping the animal's hair or feathers for this reason. Hence, plating in medieval times was clearly intended to be more of an expression of the host's authority than of the dish itself (Deroy et al., 2014).

As previously stated, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are said to have seen a shift in French cuisine. During this time, Louis XIV elevated the significance of cuisine in French culture,

highlighting the importance of not only taste but also visual appeal (Deroy et al., 2014; Park, 2013; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). In fact, this period has laid the foundation for today's haute cuisine (Deroy et al., 2014). Haute cuisine is often described as an industry that requires extensive training and development of the five senses in order to master the craft of high-end cooking (Abbate et al., 2019; Presenza et al., 2017). Haute cuisine restaurants, while making up a small portion of the whole restaurant industry, play a significant role and show standards for others to follow. Its economic and cultural significance comes from the value it creates through the use of aesthetics and symbolism. As a result, the success of haute cuisine is heavily dependent on the skills, originality, and image of the chefs (Abbate et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, the most notable changes of this period could be attributed to the well-known French chef and pâtissier, Marie-Antonin Carême. He was a passionate amateur architect, as well as a chef who served notable historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte or Tsar Alexander (Deroy et al., 2014; Meulen & Wiesel, 2017; Park, 2013; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). He partly gained fame for incorporating architectural elements into his dishes, constructing them into the forms of notable landmarks, natural wonders, and pyramids (Cifci et al., 2021; Park, 2013). Moreover, the famous croquembouche is also connected to his name (Deroy et al., 2014; Park, 2013). The dessert consisting of custard-filled puffs covered in caramel and layered in the shape of a pyramid, is still a work of art during special occasions such as baptisms or weddings (Deroy et al., 2014; McMahon, 2023). Therefore, the French chef who was even referred to as 'the king of cooks and the cook of kings' had clearly left his mark in the history of plating (Deroy et al., 2014; Galarza, 2016). However, two major conceptual innovations associated with his name should be highlighted. Firstly, Carême introduced the concept of originality in food presentation, allowing chefs to creatively compose dishes based on their own inspiration, rather than adhering to traditional codes like in Kaiseki cuisine. This break from tradition led to new forms of plating and continues to be influential today. Secondly, he is credited for the idea that plating might be arbitrary. It suggests that the way a dish is presented does not have to be limited to its ingredients or natural forms. It can instead be creative and unique, drawing inspiration from other forms of art (Deroy et al., 2014).

The evolution introduced by Carême only slowly integrated into the culinary culture. Nevertheless, the spread of his ideas has been accompanied and likely influenced by other

developments as well (Deroy et al., 2014). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the way food was served at restaurants began to change with the introduction of ‘*service à la Russe*,’ where dishes were brought out one by one, rather than guests serving themselves as in ‘*service à la Française*’ (now known as a buffet) (Deroy et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2016). However, as diners wanted to eat lighter and faster, the ‘*service à la Russe*’ also had to adapt to be more efficient (Deroy et al., 2014). Auguste Escoffier, a pioneer in the restaurant industry, recognized this and discussed how the preparation of dishes in the kitchen could be rationalized in his widely respected book, *Le Guide Culinaire* (Escoffier, 2013). Moreover, another historically decisive change came with the so-called nouvelle cuisine (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017). The nouvelle cuisine movement emerged in contrast to traditional cooking, as symbolised by Escoffier’s academism, and was founded based on the ideals of truth, light, simplicity, and inventiveness (Rao et al., 2003). Unlike traditional cuisine, which placed a heavy emphasis on the prestige of the restaurant and the use of elaborate techniques and long menus, nouvelle cuisine focuses on the chef’s creativity and the use of fresh ingredients, short menus, and quick service (Rao et al., 2003; Sheraton, 1979). During this period, Fernand Point introduced principles that would become key features of nouvelle cuisine, such as using seasonal ingredients to highlight natural flavours, and presenting food simply and elegantly (Deroy et al., 2014; Park, 2013; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). In the 1960s and 1970s, as part of the growing nouvelle cuisine movement, Paul Bocuse – who was trained by Point – further developed and popularized this style and was in fact known for his precise and visually striking food presentation (Deroy et al., 2014; Grimes, 2018; Park, 2013; Rajput, 2023; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Moreover, in these ages, many chefs acknowledged that Asian cuisine, particularly Japanese, greatly impacted their approach of using ingredients and presenting dishes. One possible reason for the increased exchange of culinary ideas between renowned French and Japanese chefs is the establishment of the first-ever French culinary school in Japan, led by chef Shizuo Tsuji in 1960 (Deroy et al., 2014; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Hence, inspired by the Japanese culinary culture, since the early 1970s, simplicity, freshness, and plate layout have been essential elements of the French nouvelle cuisine, with accurate plating being an important aspect of cooking (Meulen & Wiesel, 2017).

In the current era of Instagram-worthy dining experiences, multiple contemporary food plating trends have emerged, making food appearances of greater significance than ever

(CookinGenie, 2023). As of today, it is recommended to integrate different shapes and textures in the plates. This could be done by playing with textures and using for example different sauces or foams. Similarly, for the shapes, it is possible to use different types of cutting techniques, for instance for vegetables (e.g.: sliced or diced) (CookinGenie, 2023; Edwards, 2023). Moreover, playing with colours and creating contrasts on the plate has also become a popular method (CookinGenie, 2023). The most convenient way for this is to use colourful ingredients in the first place, such as carrots, beans or cauliflower among many others (Edwards, 2023). The usage of edible decorations, especially the usage of edible flowers has also increased. It is an excellent way to style the meals and also to create new tastes on the plate (CookinGenie; Edwards, 2023). In addition, several new, more specific techniques have evolved including landscape, hide and seek, and bathing plating (Joshi, 2022; Unilever Food Solutions, n.d). Landscape plating is in fact inspired by landscape gardens, and the food is positioned on the plate low and long (Unilever Food Solutions, n.d.). The hide and seek technique is especially used in fine-dining restaurants, and it uses layering to cover up the main element of the dish, providing a feeling of surprise for the guests (Joshi, 2022). Finally, the bathing method, just as its name suggests, is actually ‘bathing’ the main element of the dish in a sauce or broth (Joshi, 2022; Unilever Food Solutions, n.d). Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that when overall speaking about plating trends today, the concepts of simplicity and elegance can be observed (Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts, 2023).

Additionally, the emergence of molecular gastronomy has opened up new possibilities for chefs, allowing them to experiment and express themselves through the creation of innovative dishes (Cifci et al., 2021). According to Roosth (2013, p. 4), molecular gastronomy could be defined as “a food movement whose practitioners – chemists who study food and chefs who apply their results – define as the application of the scientific method and laboratory apparatuses to further cooking”. There is no doubt that the merging of physical sciences and culinary talent has radically altered the fine dining environment during the last few decades (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Hence, such evolvments have given chefs the freedom to push the boundaries of conventional cooking and explore the scientific and artistic aspects of food preparation (Cifci et al., 2021). When speaking about molecular gastronomy, it is also important to highlight the emergence of the so-called ‘Note-by-Note Cuisine’. It is a culinary method in which common ingredients like vegetables or

meat are replaced with their chemical constituents and is actually considered as a potential new culinary trend which could ensure food security, minimize food waste, as well as save energy in the future (Chandran, 2018; This, 2013).

Hence, based on the brief overview of plating history, the visual presentation of food has undergone a significant evolution throughout the years, with various influences shaping its development. From its traditional origins, plating has become more artistic and creative, giving chefs more creative independence today when it comes to the visual presentation of food.

### **3.4 The Visual Cues of Plating**

As previously explored, the art of plating does not only mean the selection of a plate, but it also includes the overall presentation of the meal on the plate. This presentation involves the combination of various visual attributes of the plateware to create a visually appealing and cohesive presentation (Spence et al., 2014). Hence, the drive to present food in a visually appealing manner has led to the manipulation of ingredients into intricate and artistic structures on a plate. The emphasis on visual appeal is based on the understanding that certain visual properties of food, such as colour, shape, or balance, among many others, may have a significant influence on individuals' eating behaviours and habits. Moreover, the relationship between psychology and culinology highlights the importance of considering these visual elements in the creation of a unique and memorable dining experience (Cifci et al., 2021).

In plating, just as in all other forms of art, there is no right or wrong approach to be creative (Cifci et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that certain principles and rules, when properly tested and applied, can lead to more successful outcomes in terms of visual appeal. As a matter of fact, without an understanding of some basic design principles, it can be difficult to know how to properly arrange and present the food in a manner that will appeal to others (Cifci et al., 2021; Germain, 2015; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Consequently, it is important to identify some key design principles that can serve as a useful framework for success (Cifci et al., 2021). This section is going to elaborate on the most important visual cues that restaurants should consider when it comes to the presentation of food, including colour, shape, balance, and position, by mainly relying on the works of Spence (main or co-author in 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022) and Cifci et

al. (2021). Fleming (2018) recognised Charles Spence as “the food scientist who is changing the way we eat” in *The Guardian*, thus identifying him as a prominent author in the present dissertation. His areas of expertise include psychology, neuroscience, multisensory experiences, and food design from a psychological and cognitive neuroscience perspective, to name a few (*Professor Charles Spence | University of Oxford*, n.d.). Furthermore, Cifci et al.’s (2021) work provides vital insights to this research because it examines plating elements from the perspective of master chefs, thus providing a professional viewpoint as well.

In the art of plating, colour is undoubtedly one of the most important and visually appealing elements (Campo et al., 2017). As previously stated, the interconnectedness of food perception and sensory science becomes apparent when discussing colours, particularly the phenomenon of cross-modality. In fact, the combination of colour (red, blue, yellow, etc.) and the intensity level of the colour of the specific item that is being eaten influences people’s understanding of scent and taste (Spence, 2017). According to different researchers (e.g.: Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014), when it comes to colour in the visual presentation of food, there are two aspects to consider: the colour of the plate itself, and the colour of the food. In fact, various studies have conducted experiments to investigate the impact of plateware colours on taste perceptions. In one laboratory research, for instance, participants evaluated sweet or salty popcorn from four distinct coloured bowls (green, blue, white, and red). The results showed that the salty popcorn was in fact evaluated by individuals as tasting sweeter when served from a red or blue bowl, whereas the sweet popcorn was evaluated as tasting saltier when served from a blue bowl (Spence et al., 2014; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Furthermore, another study made a comparison of whether there was a difference in taste between a strawberry-flavoured mousse placed on a black or white plate. The mousse served from the white plate was perceived to be 15% stronger in flavour, 10% sweeter, and was preferred 10% more compared to the same mousse served on a black plate (Piqueras-Fiszman et al., 2012; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Regarding this particular case, the phenomenon of colour contrast can be observed, which is important to mention when it comes to the plateware. This occurs when an object’s perceived colour can change based on the colour of the background against which it is viewed (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). The concept of simultaneous colour contrast implies that food can be combined and structured in a way that modifies the colours of the food, whether by

enhancing, diminishing, or otherwise changing them. For instance, scrambled eggs served on a yellow plate will appear paler, while purple grapes will appear less purple on a purple plate or more red on a blue plate. Similarly, a salad is going to appear less green on a green plateware compared to a plate without any green (Spence et al., 2014). Hence, chefs must look out for these contrasts when choosing the plateware. However, it is worth noting that white and creamy coloured plates are the ones most commonly used by many chefs and cooks to showcase their dishes (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2014).

Moreover, when speaking about food and ingredients, colours can actually have a very informative role. Colours are claimed to convey information and create expectations about food's "taste, quality, safety, familiarity, and freshness" (Paakki et al., 2019, p. 6). It also has a great influence on the perceived taste of the food, which was proven by several studies. For example, it is possible for food or beverage businesses to enhance the sensation of sweetness by up to 10% with carefully chosen product or packaging colours. Study showed that individuals might perceive a drink with the correct colour (such as a pinkish-red hue) as sweeter than one with an incorrect colour (such as green), even if the latter drink has a higher sugar content of up to 10% (Spence, 2017). A study conducted by Wei et al. (2012) even highlighted some expected tastes regarding juices. A juice with a greenish colour is perceived to be more sour than a red-coloured one; a yellowish-green juice is anticipated to be more bitter compared to other colours; and a more intense, vibrant yellow colour leads customers to assume it is a freshly made juice (Campo et al., 2017). Another experiment published in Spence's (2017) book called '*Gastrophysics: The new science of eating*' also revealed interesting insights about this phenomenon. It was conducted by a marketer called Wheatley, who offered a group of friends a meal of steak, chips, and peas. The lighting was dim at the start of the dinner, which was intentionally done to conceal the true colour of the food. However, later on, Wheatley's guests were shocked to discover that they had been eating blue steak, green chips, and vivid red peas when the lights had been switched on halfway through the dinner. A few of them felt sick and several immediately had to go to the restroom (Spence, 2017; Spence, 2021). This experiment actually highlights that most people prefer more natural colours and colours commonly associated with food when it comes to plating (Paakki et al., 2019).

Generally, colourfulness has been identified as a significant visual characteristic of food (Spence et al., 2022). The majority of customers favour colourful food, and it is thought to

be visually appealing and pleasurable (Paakki et al., 2019). However, it is important to avoid excessive use of colours in plate design. Previous research has shown that gourmet plates typically have a limited number of colours, as it is believed that beyond five, the plate could become harsh. Hence, a sophisticated plate is believed to have no more than three or four colours (Cifci et al., 2021; Germain, 2015).

Nevertheless, when it comes to colours, the presence of the so-called colour-taste associations must be mentioned. A theory, where these associations derive from, is simply people's everyday environment. This could include the colours used in product packaging and labelling commonly seen in supermarkets (Higgins & Hayes, 2019; Spence et al., 2014; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). These repeated experiences could influence their expectations and perceptions of the taste of food based on its appearance. Therefore, by understanding the typical colours used to package and market certain types of food, consumers may make associations between colour and taste (Spence et al., 2014).

Shape is considered to be another crucial visual cue in the art of plating. The shape characteristics of either the ingredients or the plateware can also impact people's impressions of food (Kravchyk, 2022; Spence et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2017). Just as with colours, several research have examined the influence of shapes when it comes to plating. Most of these studies contrasted round versus angular-shaped meal presentations, and in fact, they revealed the same patterns of food perception (Spence et al., 2022). They showed that in general sweetness is connected with roundness, whereas saltiness, bitterness, and sourness are more likely associated with angular forms (Campo et al., 2017; Fairhurst et al., 2015; Kravchyk, 2022; Motoki & Velasco, 2021; Velasco et al., 2018; Vermeir & Roose, 2020; Wang et al., 2017).

In a study conducted by Fairhurst et al. (2015), participants were presented with beetroot jellies in either round or angular shapes and served on either round or angular plates. The results showed that when the meal was offered in a rounded shape and/or served on a round plate, the participants indicated it as tasting sweeter than when it was offered in an angular form and/or served on an angular dish (Fairhurst et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2022; Velasco et al., 2016a; Wang et al., 2019). Another interesting real-life case is an incident that happened with Cadbury chocolate. In 2013, Cadbury altered the shape of their famous Dairy Milk chocolate bar by rounding the corners and reducing its weight slightly (BBC News, 2013;

Spence, 2017). Despite the company's assurance that the recipe had not changed, consumers voiced their complaints, convinced that the chocolate now tasted sweeter (BBC News, 2013; Martin, 2013; Spence, 2017). A spokesperson of Cadbury, actually needed to make a public statement, saying that the only change made was to the bar's shape, which was changed from an angular shape to a curved one (Spence, 2017).

Therefore, people generally associate angular shapes with bitter, salty, sour and carbonated tastes, while round shapes are linked with sweet and creamy sensations (Campo et al., 2017; Fairhurst et al., 2015; Kravchyk, 2022; Motoki & Velasco, 2021; Velasco et al., 2018; Vermeir & Roose, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). According to Spence (2017), there have been two possible explanations for the associations of shapes with tastes. Firstly, that an angular shape can be connected with danger and threat, as it could be a potential weapon (Spence, 2017; Vermeir & Roose, 2020). Bitterness could indicate poison, while sourness and carbonation were cues to avoid overripe or spoiled food (Spence, 2017). On the other hand, sweet and round have positive connotations (Spence, 2017; Spence & Van Doorn, 2022; Wang et al., 2017). This could be a reason why people associate certain shapes with specific tastes, aromas, and textures, even if they have never experienced them together before. Secondly, another explanation could be that our brains have learned to associate certain shapes with specific taste properties due to some correlation present in the everyday environment. In other words, our brains might have picked up on a relationship between shape and taste through exposure to it in the world around us. In this case, product logos can be considered (Spence, 2017). For example, the logos for most beer and carbonated water brands are angular, not round (Ngo et al., 2012; Spence, 2017). Although there are exceptions, it is noteworthy how frequently one sees a red star or triangle on the front of a bottle or can (Spence, 2017).

Lastly, it is crucial to elaborate briefly on the significance of balance and positioning in plating. In the context of food plating, balance could refer to both the visual and nutritional equilibrium of the elements on a plate. The goal is to create a harmonious and appealing composition that is both aesthetically pleasing and nutritionally satisfying (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2014; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). In terms of positioning, it is critical to take into account how the food is displayed and positioned on the dish and evaluate the overall arrangement of the plate (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2014).

Various studies have revealed that individuals appreciate a balanced presentation of the plate's items more than an unbalanced one (Campo et al., 2017; Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2022; Velasco et al., 2016b). Balancing textures on a plate is a crucial aspect that chefs pay attention to in order to provide guests with a range of flavours in one meal. It is widely recognized that for the best experience, a plate should include a combination of textures such as hard, soft, crispy, liquid, hot, and cold to create a harmonious balance (Cifci et al., 2021). A qualitative study conducted by Cifci et al. (2021) has further highlighted the importance of sauces. It emphasized the significance of sauces in plate design and outlined three crucial elements of a plate: setup, focus, and sauce. Chefs frequently incorporate sauces into the dishes and regard them as a key items in achieving balance on the plate. Moreover, one of the chef participants of the research has proposed the following guideline for balance: the main dish should occupy most of the plate, followed by the garnish, and the sauce, in this order of relevance (Cifci et al., 2021).

Cifci et al. (2021) in her study further emphasized the significance of nutritional balance on the plate. It is believed that "each plate must contain carbohydrate, protein, fiber, and a certain amount of fat" (Cifci et al., 2021, p. 12). Furthermore, a balanced plate should consist of vitamins, carbohydrates, and proteins. These three components can be represented by for instance vegetables for vitamins, any kind of meat or meat substitutions for proteins, and for example rice or potatoes for carbohydrates (Cifci et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been emphasized that both freshness and geographical location of ingredients play a crucial role in determining the nutritional value of food (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Hence, in plate design, most chefs prefer to use fresh products that are in season. It is important since plating gives diners the first impression, so the initial information about the freshness of the ingredients (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014; The Culinary Pro, n.d).

Regarding positioning and the overall arrangement of the plate, people generally prefer food that is presented in an organized and neat arrangement, compared to a messy one. A neat presentation can positively influence their perception of the meal and enhance their enjoyment of it (Michel et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2022). In this case, space management is one of the aspects that should be considered (Germain, 2015). According to Germain (2015), a plate filled with food without any empty space can be unappealing and lacks visual interest. Hence, a rule for aesthetic plating is to avoid using all the surface area of the plate and to

incorporate the so-called ‘negative’ space as an important component (Germain, 2015; The Culinary Pro, n.d.; Wards, 2020).

Moreover, there has been an ongoing discussion about the symmetrical or asymmetrical position of food on the plate. Asymmetrical meal presentation is common in fine-dining places, for instance. In fact, the perception of higher culinary inventiveness is more connected with asymmetric food presentation (Spence et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that in such instances, arranging the meal on the right side is the most effective technique for increasing consumer likability (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2019). However, other studies suggest that positioning food in the centre of the plate can positively impact the consumer’s perception from an aesthetic standpoint and diners actually have higher preferences for that (Cifci et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2015; Velasco et al., 2016b). Nonetheless, Germain (2015) highlighted that the final arrangement of the meal depends on various factors such as the shape of the ingredients, the design of the plate, the selected visual elements, and the desired contrasts.

However, it is vital to note that in addition to aesthetic and design considerations, some fundamental factors play a significant role in determining a restaurant’s plating style and therefore they should not be disregarded. One of these factors is actually the character of the chef. It is believed that the plate design is determined greatly by the style of the chef (Cifci et al., 2021; Edwards, 2023; École Ducasse, 2023; The Culinary Pro, n.d). According to a qualitative study conducted by Cifci et al. (2021, p. 16), chefs participating in the research actually claimed that “they add all their souls, selves, imagination, culture, and creativity while designing plates.” As a result, the design of a chef’s plate can reflect their identity, character, and personality (Cifci et al., 2021; Edwards, 2023). This highlights the importance of the chef’s personal taste and visual preferences in shaping both the taste and appearance of the food and plates (Cifci et al., 2021; École Ducasse, 2023).

Another prominent factor is the importance of considering the target audience. This highlights the need for chefs to take into account the preferences and characteristics of their intended diners when creating their plate designs (Cifci et al., 2021; Rudakova, 2023; The Culinary Pro, n.d). By doing so, chefs can ensure that their presentation appeals to and satisfies their target audience, making their dining experience more enjoyable and memorable (Cifci et al., 2021). In fact, the research conducted by Cifci et al. (2021) has also

indicated that chefs are mindful of this phenomenon and consider all of their clients' requests and wishes while designing plates since they want their guests to be satisfied.

Finally, it should be mentioned that plating could also be a topic of subjectivity (Spence et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2022). People's preferences for plating may be influenced by their past experiences and also their mental comparison to the conventional or archetypical appearance of a particular dish. This opens up an interesting subject for exploration into how such prototypes are established and the extent to which semantic expectations have a role in the judgement of food presentation (Spence et al., 2014). Moreover, another approach suggested by Spence (2014) to understand the preferences for plating could be related to the general principles of aesthetic harmony. This perspective is based on aesthetics in the field of arts, which believes that humans' emotions and evaluations of visual stimuli are influenced by overall principles of harmony. These principles can encompass various elements such as "movement, unity, variety, balance, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, proportion, and pattern" (Spence et al., 2014, p. 7). In future studies, by examining plating in this context, it could be possible to obtain a greater comprehension of why certain presentations are more appealing than others, and how these principles might be applied to improve the dining experience.

Additionally, it is also important to emphasize that the visual presentation of food and the art of plating is a relatively new field, as aesthetics has historically overlooked the experience of eating. This could be due to the belief that eating is primarily related to satisfying appetite rather than the enjoyment of visual attributes (Spence et al., 2014).

In conclusion, in view of all that has been elaborated so far, the growing importance of food plating in today's society and the rightfulness of the famous phrase 'we eat first with our eyes' cannot be denied. In fact, in the future, the art of plating is expected to be a critical aspect of restaurants' branding and will likely grow as a marketing tool (Cifci et al., 2021). Literature shows that the way food is presented can impact both our brain and our senses and even affect the taste of the food. This highlights the importance of considering food appearance in food marketing strategies and the practical implications of the literature regarding the art of plating (Campo et al., 2017). Therefore, the following chapter will elaborate on the importance of brands and brand management in the context of the food industry and restaurants, as well as on the concept of brand experience.

## **4. Branding and Brand Experience in The Restaurant Industry**

The goal of the upcoming chapter is to provide an overview of the significance of branding in the restaurant sector as well as an in-depth discussion of the emerging notion of brand experience. The section will begin by explaining how important branding and brand management are in today's restaurant sector. Following that, it will proceed with an extensive examination of brand experience, defining the notion, presenting its dimensions, and emphasising the effects it has. The chapter will finish with a closer look at brand experiences in the context of restaurants, emphasising their significance in the field for future study as well as managerial implications.

### **4.1 The Importance of Branding in The Restaurant Industry**

Branding is a vital component of corporate success in a variety of sectors, including the restaurant industry (McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023). In fact, due to today's severely competitive business market, this applies especially to the restaurant and catering industries, which offer customers an endless and diverse selection to choose from (Bistrohub, 2020; Dobos, 2022; Van Duyne, 2023). According to Dabeva (2012), in the contemporary landscape, the ability to differentiate, emphasise, and highlight the distinctive attributes of products and services is critical. Therefore, operating a restaurant requires more than just serving delicious meals (McCracken, 2022). Without a unique identity, restaurants cannot connect with customers on an emotional level; thus, besides offering excellent food and service, a carefully planned brand strategy becomes critical in creating lasting impressions among customers and distinguishing oneself from competitors in the market (Bistrohub, 2020; Kakadiya, 2023; McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023).

As a result, it is widely understood that establishing and maintaining powerful brands is critical for succeeding in the hospitality sector (Gardini, 2014; Kwun, 2012). Nonetheless, in addition to ensuring long-term success for businesses, restaurant owners may notice a variety of beneficial outcomes that can result from proper branding and brand management (Dabeva, 2012). Hence, the following list will demonstrate some of the most important advantages that might derive from branding in the restaurant industry:

- To begin with, restaurant branding aids in developing a unique identity and personality for businesses (Kwun, 2012; McCracken, 2022; Smith, 2017). It

addresses the restaurant's core values, the overall representation of the business, as well as how it wants to be perceived by customers on the market (McCracken, 2022). Furthermore, by developing a coherent brand strategy, a defined tone can serve as the foundation for any future marketing materials, allowing the business to maintain a consistent image (Dobos, 2022).

- Branding also enables restaurants to tell their stories, aiding customers in better understanding both tangible and intangible products and services of the business (Smith, 2017; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). Hence, branding serves as an informative tool and an indicator of the restaurant's quality and image since it allows effective communication about products and services (Genc, 2010).
- Branding can also create a profound impression on diners, and as mentioned earlier, facilitate highlighting its distinct qualities and effectively differentiating itself from others (McCracken, 2022; Smith, 2017). As customers face an overwhelming number of alternatives, branding could help provide reasons why that restaurant is a better option than others on the market (McCracken, 2022). Hence, it could be the key point of differentiation, providing a competitive advantage to the business (W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004; Smith, 2017).
- Restaurants may also build a strong emotional connection with customers, leading to frequent visits and therefore increased customer loyalty, especially when paired with excellent cuisine and a memorable dining experience (Dobos, 2022; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). By building trust and loyalty among diners, restaurants can also profit from better customer recalls and positive word-of-mouth (Cuboh, 2022; Robitaille, 2023; Smith, 2017).
- Branding is also closely connected to credibility. Given the sensitivity surrounding food, people are unlikely to dine in a restaurant that does not appear to be trustworthy (Dobos, 2022). Restaurants may successfully decrease perceived risks, such as financial, social, and safety concerns, by building a recognisable brand that customers are familiar with and have positive associations with (Dabeva, 2012; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). Therefore, through the informational function of branding, customers can gain knowledge about products and services, have consistent quality standards, and receive clear and trustworthy information about the brand itself (Genc, 2010).

- Finally, developing a strong brand opens up greater potential for brand extension (Kwun, 2012; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). Hence, as a result of a successful brand strategy, restaurants may improve revenue performance by introducing new items or services with lower costs (Dabeva, 2012).

Nonetheless, when looking at the restaurant industry, it is crucial to highlight that brands and brand management involve affecting customers through various channels (Dabeva, 2012). In other words, since dining at a restaurant is a sensory experience, the brand must consider a variety of elements that influence guests throughout the ‘journey’, from the moment they book the table until they leave the restaurant (McCracken, 2022; Smith, 2017). A successful brand strategy incorporates every visible aspect of restaurants as well as every component customers might interact with, including the staff, the menu, advertisements, or even the presentation of food, just to mention a few (Bistrohub, 2020; McCracken, 2022; Smith, 2017). Nonetheless, despite the heterogeneity of restaurant branding, consistency of these elements is critical in order to build an entity (Dabeva, 2012; Gourmet Marketing, n.d.). Every individual component contributes to the brand’s development, and while it may seem like they are good enough on their own, the goal is to combine them in the most ideal way. Therefore, instead of considering elements as independent entities, restaurant owners should synchronise them to ensure they correspond with the overall concept of the business (Dabeva, 2012).

In order to ensure consistency among the various branding elements in restaurants, some initial steps must be taken to build the foundation of the brand. According to Dobos (2022), the following steps are necessary to complete in order to establish a successful brand in the restaurant industry. First of all, the whole concept of the restaurant needs to be defined. This includes what kind of food it would sell, what would be the price range, as well as the target audience among others (Cuboh, 2022; Dobos, 2022; Van Duyne, 2023). After having a clear concept, it is also important to summarize the restaurant’s purpose, values, and beliefs through a mission statement (Dobos, 2022). This serves as a base for the restaurant’s culture, environment, products, workers, and also customers. It should be cohesive, distinct, and reflect what the restaurant stands for (Van Duyne, 2023). The following stage is to establish the restaurant’s market position. Strategically positioning a restaurant allows the identification of competitors and key audience groups, aiding the development of more

tailored communication strategies (Dobos, 2022; Van Duyne, 2023). Finally, it is crucial to establish a brand voice (Dobos, 2022). This will set the tone for all branding elements of the restaurant and needs to be consistent across all the communication materials (Van Duyne, 2023).

Once the foundations of the brand are established, it is vital to create more elements to ensure a comprehensive and complete business. One of the most important components is a carefully chosen brand name, which might contribute greatly to the restaurant's success (Kotler et al., 2022; McCracken, 2022; Smith, 2017; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). Keller and Swaminathan (2020) have also highlighted the importance of a well-chosen brand name. They claimed that brand name – which is probably the most essential brand element – not only adds greatly to brand equity but also functions as a brief, yet powerful form of communication. It is a way to represent the fundamental concept and features of the products and services, making it unique and indicative of its positioning (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). This could be complemented with a memorable tagline or slogan to effectively communicate the brand's promise (McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023; Smith, 2017). Due to their concise character, slogans, similarly to brand names, are effective instruments for boosting brand equity. They provide a clear understanding of a brand's essence and simplify the main idea of marketing initiatives into a short phrase (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Moreover, undoubtedly, the appearance of a restaurant's brand contributes significantly to its success, since it captures potential customers' attention before they even acknowledge what the restaurant has to offer (Van Duyne, 2023). According to Keller and Swaminathan (2020), visual components are equally important in establishing brand equity and, more specifically, brand awareness. Hence, visual branding is one of the most critical elements restaurants need to consider, and it includes not only the logo but also the colour palette, the fonts, the menu design, the interior décor, or even the staff's uniform or the plateware (Bistrohub, 2020; Cuboh, 2022; Dobos, 2022; McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023; Smith, 2017; Van Duyne, 2023).

Therefore, besides all the benefits mentioned previously, a carefully planned brand strategy and the creation of a powerful brand may help restaurants boost their competitive advantage, keep regular diners, as well as attract new ones (Cuboh, 2022; Robitaille, 2023; W. G. Kim & Kim, 2004). However, creating a distinct brand is a challenging task that necessitates a

thorough understanding of the restaurant's target group as well as the characteristics of its operating market (Robitaille, 2023).

## **4.2 Brand Experience**

Throughout the years, the economic and social landscapes have transformed greatly. In fact, at the start of the millennium, it was proposed that experiences were at the basis of a new type of economy and marketing approach (Schmitt et al., 2014). Pine and Gilmore (1998) referred to this phenomenon as the 'experience economy', where businesses shift from offering products and services to offering experiences (Cleff et al., 2014). Hence, the economic worth of society has evolved through various phases. It began with a commodity-based phase before the Industrial Revolution, then evolved to a manufacturing phase as a result of the revolution, and finally to the service-focused economy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pine & Gilmore 1998; Schmitt et al., 2014). With the introduction of the 'experience economy', the fourth phase, the most important economic offerings have become not items or services, but rather enjoyable and informative experiences (Schmitt et al., 2014).

Cleff et al. (2014) identified three main reasons that have occurred in the past few years which have contributed to the emergence of this new phase. Firstly, market saturation has resulted in increased worldwide competition, which may be attributed mostly to the similarity of the practical benefits provided by different products. Secondly, due to the excessive amount of advertising across various communication channels, marketers must adapt their techniques to catch customers' attention and successfully communicate their messages. Finally, and most notably, customers are increasingly adopting hedonistic lifestyles, with an increase in demand for pleasurable experiences (Cleff et al., 2014). As opposed to the perspective of traditional marketing, contemporary customers are not only considered rational but also emotional, who do not base their choices of products and services solely on functionality and benefits (Cleff et al., 2014; Khan & Fatma, 2017; Moreira et al., 2017). Customers today seek products and marketing initiatives that engage their senses, connect with their emotions, and spark intellectual interest while also matching their lifestyles and, most importantly, delivering experiences (Moreira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014).

Consequently, the nature and role of brands in people's lives have evolved alongside the evolution of economic and social landscapes. As of today, customers often desire more than

functionality, seeking enjoyable experiences with their chosen brands (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Hwang et al., 2021). The importance of brand experience could also be observed in marketing and brand management literature, as scholars have been conducting more research in this area (Khan & Fatma, 2017). Hence, the need to create distinctive and memorable brand experiences has been highlighted in branding literature over the last ten years in order to build better connections between brands and customers and improve the overall performance of businesses (Khan & Fatma, 2017; Khan & Rahman, 2015). Nonetheless, the notion of experience has been studied in a variety of contexts by numerous researchers, who have contributed to the formation of some of the key ideas and associations related to the concept (Beig & Nika, 2019; Pina & Dias, 2021). Thus, the following section will delve deeper into the definition, dimensions, and effects associated with the concept of brand experience.

#### **4.2.1. Defining Brand Experience**

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were the first to bring forward the concept of ‘experience’ within the realm of marketing, proposing that consumption is not solely rational. They suggested that it also includes an experiential component, given that the act of consumption represents an exploration of “fantasies, feelings, and fun” (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132; Pina & Dias, 2021). Moreover, as previously mentioned, Pine and Gilmore (1998) contributed to the field by introducing the concept of ‘experience economy’ and emphasising the personal nature of experiences (Pina & Dias, 2021). Building upon these ideas, Schmitt (1999a, 1999b) further defined the notion by exploring experience from a multidimensional perspective for the first time (Khan & Fatma, 2017).

Hence, marketing literature has presented several different constructs of ‘experience’, with research examining it in multiple contexts and stages of the consumer life cycle (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Nysveen et al., 2012). This has led to constructs such as consumption experience, service experience, shopping experience, product experience, customer experience, and brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Nysveen et al., 2012). It is also believed that experiences could occur through direct or indirect interactions with a product or service offered by businesses (Brakus et al., 2009; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Nysveen et al., 2012; Shamim & Butt, 2013). Direct interaction includes seeking out product or service information, going through

the purchase procedure, and consuming the service or product, while indirect interaction is primarily linked to being exposed to marketing communications and advertisements of the company (Brakus et al., 2009; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Shamim & Butt, 2013). Therefore, the majority of these experiences are related to specific stages of the consumer life cycle (such as shopping experience) or specific propositions (such as service experience and product experience) (Nysveen et al., 2012). Nonetheless, despite the fact that there are several interpretations for the concept of experience, Nysveen et al. (2012) highlighted that most articles concentrate specifically on customer experience, which refers to the encounters between customers and a particular part of an organization. Thus, customer experience is viewed as a comprehensive definition that encapsulates all other experience constructs, given that it covers various situations and stages of a customer's journey. However, considering that experiences related to a brand can be had by both individuals who purchase and those who do not, we regard the concept of brand experience as the most encompassing in terms of experiences (Nysveen et al., 2012). Hence, the overall brand experience is comprised of several experiential notions such as consumption, service, shopping, and product experiences (Brakus et al., 2009; Khan & Fatma, 2017; Khan & Rahman, 2015).

Ha and Perks (2005) took a cognitive approach to brand experiences. Following their research, the term could be described as how well-informed and familiar a consumer is with a specific brand or brand category. They further stated that increased brand experience can lead to better memorability and deeper significance for individuals, potentially fostering greater trust in the brand and enhancing their ability to classify brands by their attributes (Ha & Perks, 2005). Moreover, according to Alloza (2008), brand experience is defined as consumers' perceptions of the brand at every interaction with it, from advertising impressions to human encounters. In addition, they highlighted that direct personal connections are the most important aspect of creating an outstanding brand experience (Alloza, 2008). Nevertheless, based on the data collected for this research, it can be said that Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) were the first to provide a comprehensive definition of brand experience, describing it "as subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." The elements that represent a brand's identity and design, which can act as stimuli, can include the name, slogan, logo, signage, packaging, mascot, the environment of the physical store, or any other

communication forms like advertisements, websites, brochures, or even events (Beig & Nika, 2019; Brakus et al., 2009; Moreira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the stimuli could also be in the form of the brand's visual identity, involving shapes, colours, typefaces, or any other design elements (Brakus et al., 2009; Moreira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014). It is also worth highlighting that regardless of whether people lack a personal connection to a brand or show no interest in it, they can still undergo experiences associated with it (Beig & Nika, 2019). Moreover, brand experiences can vary in their level of intensity and strength, as well as in their valence. In terms of intensity and strength, some experiences could be more intense or stronger than others, whereas valence reflects that some could be positive, neutral, or even negative. They could also differ in origin and duration, thus, sometimes, customers have more spontaneous and sudden experiences with brands that might not last long, and other times, these experiences are more thought-out and could last longer (Beig & Nika, 2019; Brakus et al., 2009; Pina & Dias, 2021). Nevertheless, it is believed that as time passes, brand experiences that last longer and are saved in customers' memory, are anticipated to affect their overall satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009).

Furthermore, it is also crucial to note that although brand experience is connected to other brand constructs, it is still considered conceptually separate from them (Beig & Nika, 2019; Brakus et al., 2009; Khan & Fatma, 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014). It was Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) who provided a more detailed examination of this phenomenon in their study and stated that "in particular, brand experience differs from evaluative, affective, and associative constructs, such as brand attitudes, brand involvement, brand attachment, customer delight, and brand personality." They claimed that as opposed to brand attitudes, which concern more general impressions, such as liking or disliking brands, experiences are specific reactions to the interactions with a brand. Also, while brand involvement and attachment necessitate a personal interest in or connection to the brand, brand experiences could occur without these. In contrast to customer delight, which occurs after product use, brand experiences can happen at any interaction, whether expected or unexpected. Finally, unlike brand personality, which attributes human traits to businesses, brand experiences are about genuine reactions to brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009).

#### **4.2.2. Dimensions of Brand Experience**

Over time, various scholars have proposed different dimensions to characterize experiences within marketing literature. Nonetheless, despite the various suggestions, it can be said that there is a consensus on the most critical dimensions of experiences, as similarities can be observed in most of the interpretations (Nysveen et al., 2012).

As previously stated, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were the first to present the notion of experience within this field. Interestingly, despite the fact that they did not identify precise dimensions of experiences, their research already pointed at the most important dimensions that experiences could have (Nysveen et al., 2012). It highlighted the experiential view of consumption by claiming that it could also involve “various playful leisure activities, sensory pleasures, daydreams, esthetic enjoyment and emotional responses” (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). Hence, this could already hint at the dimensions of activities, sensations, and emotions (Nysveen et al., 2012).

Holt (1995) has approached consumption experiences from a different perspective (Nysveen et al., 2012). In his work, he suggested ‘accounting’, ‘evaluating’, and ‘appreciating’ as dimensions of it (Holt, 1995). ‘Accounting’ refers to processing and making sense of information; ‘evaluating’ stands for forming opinions and constructing judgements; and finally, ‘appreciating’ means the emotional responses that the particular consumption experience might elicit (Holt, 1995; Nysveen et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed the four ‘e’ dimensions of experiences: ‘entertainment’, ‘educational’, ‘escapist’, and ‘esthetic’ (aesthetic). The four zones also lie along the axes of active versus passive (describes the participation), and immersion versus absorption (describes the connection) (Cleff et al., 2014; Pine & Gilmore 1998). For instance, more common entertainments among people, like watching TV or attending concerts typically involve passive absorption. In comparison, educational activities, such as attending a class, call for active participation, though participants remain still somewhat detached observers. Escapist activities, such as acting in a play, demand both active involvement and deeper immersion. Lastly, there are esthetic (aesthetic) experiences where individuals are immersed in an environment but do not actively influence it; they are considered more as observers or admirers (Pine & Gilmore 1998).

Schmitt (1999a, 1999b) made a significant contribution by advancing a multidimensional understanding of experience in relation to experiential marketing, one that closely resembles the components of brand experience. He identified five distinct dimensions of experiences, including 'sense' (sensory), 'think' (cognitive), 'feel' (affective), 'act' (physical) and 'relate' (social) (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Cleff et al., 2014; Schmitt, 1999a, 1999b). The element of 'sense' uses the five senses to create sensory experiences; the 'think' element refers to the engagement of the mind in order to deliver intellectual, solution-oriented experiences that inspire customers' creativity; when it comes to appealing to customers' feelings and emotions, the element of 'feel' prevalent; the element of 'act' represents physical experiences, lifestyles, and behaviours; and finally, the 'relate' element stands for social experiences that help a person connect to their ideal selves, other individuals, or cultures (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Schmitt, 1999b).

It was Brakus et al. (2009) who first empirically identified the brand experience dimensions. It is worth noting that the five types of experiences identified by Schmitt (1999a, 1999b) served as the foundation for their study on brand experiences (Beig & Nika, 2019; Pina & Dias, 2021). Nonetheless, as opposed to Schmitt (1999a, 1999b), Brakus et al. (2009) created a customer-focused approach that saw experiences as unique, internal, and behavioural responses of customers rather than as tactical aspects of experiential marketing (Pina & Dias, 2021). They proposed four underlying brand experience dimensions, which include 'sensory', 'affective', 'behavioural', and 'intellectual' experiences with the help of cognitive science, philosophical studies, as well as experience marketing and management (Brakus et al., 2009; Hwang et al., 2021).

'Sensory experiences' are primarily focusing on customers' visual, auditory, smell, taste, and touch perceptions (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Moreira et al., 2017; Pina & Dias, 2021; Shamim & Butt, 2013). Hence, it includes the activation of senses via brand exposure (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). In plus, many marketing professionals believe that sensory experiences are shaped through aesthetic designs emphasized in the brand's content (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020). This might include brand logos, designs, shapes, or colours just to mention a few (Hwang et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2017). Thus, visual elements are seen as key in sensory experiences, since images are easily remembered by customers. Visual brand experiences give consumers an aesthetic feel of the brand as well as its surroundings. However, the importance of tasting, smelling,

hearing, and touching varies by the products and services of businesses. Moreover, taste and touch are direct experiences, while smell and sound can be indirectly felt through a brand's atmosphere (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019).

'Affective experiences' include all of the feelings, emotions and moods sparked by interacting with businesses (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Pina & Dias, 2021; Shamim & Butt, 2013). In simple terms, it captures the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand (Hwang et al., 2021). This subdimension of experiences is imprinted in the brains of customers and causes either positive (such as love for the brand or enthusiasm for the brand) or negative (such as hatred for the brand or disgust) emotions (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020).

Moreover, 'behavioural experiences' can encourage certain physical acts, behaviours, and lifestyles after interacting with a brand (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Pina & Dias, 2021). Hence, it also entails doing tasks in a more efficient manner and even creating improvements to one's lifestyle (Hwang et al., 2021). In fact, customers are enthusiastic to participate in physical activities in order to create memorable experiences with a brand (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020). Furthermore, within this context, the body may be used as a source of well-being, as a representation of emotions, and as a form of symbolic representation (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). It is also worth highlighting that behavioural experiences leave a long-lasting impression on customers and are seen as a crucial component of successful marketing practices (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020).

Finally, the subdimension of 'intellectual experiences' involves creative and analytical thinking induced by encounters with a brand (Beig & Nika, 2019; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). Analytical thinking places an emphasis on precision and logic while looking for solutions to issues, whereas creative thinking involves spontaneity and originality when coming up with new ideas (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). Additionally, it also refers to sparking people's curiosity; as a result, it stops customers from becoming bored with a business (Hwang et al., 2021). It is also believed that customers can clearly better recall brands with intellectual experiences and remember memories associated with them. Thus, intellectual experiences should aim to convince and create positive and

satisfying memories for customers, as intellectual experience could form people's opinions about a brand (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020).

#### **4.2.3. Effect of Brand Experience on Various Brand Constructs**

Various studies have delved into the impact of brand experience on different brand constructs, consistently revealing its positive influence. Customers value brands that provide exceptional experiences, which results in more favourable responses to such businesses (Hwang et al., 2021; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020). Hence, it is believed that strong and vivid brand experiences directly lead to more favourable brand results (Schmitt et al., 2014).

For instance, Brakus et al. (2009) argued that brand experiences positively influence brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, as well as brand personality. Since positive brand experiences offer value for customers, it could lead to increased satisfaction among them (Hwang et al., 2021; Nysveen et al., 2012). Moreover, a favourable experience is one that customers see as different and memorable, one they would want to relive and recommend to others (Moreira et al., 2017). Brand experience influences not just previous satisfaction assessments, but also upcoming customer loyalty (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020). Since customers who encounter satisfying experiences with a brand tend to revisit the business and the chances of choosing competitors are reduced, it is claimed that favourable brand experiences also positively affect brand loyalty (Khan & Fatma, 2017; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Nysveen et al., 2012). Therefore, brand experience helps businesses stand out, win customer loyalty, and establish long-term connections with customers (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Ong et al., 2018). Furthermore, Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019) in their study, revealed that brand experience directly increases brand attachment since favourable brand interactions can deepen customers' emotional bonds. Within their analysis, they also claimed that the link between brand experience and brand attachment is partly shaped by brand trust. Hence, positive experiences with a brand lead customers to trust quality and feel the brand values them (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). The influence on brand trust was also supported by Khan and Fatma (2017), who claimed that there is a direct relationship between the two concepts. In their article, they also stated that brand experience is a significant predictor of brand attitude, suggesting that customers' overall opinions of a brand are greatly influenced by their interactions with it (Khan & Fatma, 2017). In addition, Beig and Nika (2019)

highlighted that attitude, product preference, purchase intention and product recall may all be significantly influenced by a combination of indirect and direct experiences.

Thus, as brand experience becomes increasingly important in today's world, marketers study its effects and how they relate to other brand elements, which could be beneficial to improve marketing strategies (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016). It is not at all unexpected, that today's top global corporations prioritise providing favourable experiences as one of their strategic objectives (Shamim & Butt, 2013). Therefore, in order to remain relevant in contemporary markets, businesses must focus on every facet of brand experience, as it not only provides increased brand value, but also drives higher sales, ensures frequent engagement and marketplace dominance (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021).

#### **4.2.4. Brand Experience in Restaurants**

As previously elaborated (see chapter 2), since dining out has become a global lifestyle trend, and competition has risen significantly in recent years, customers seek not just tangible benefits but also unique experiences when it comes to restaurants. Hence, competition has shifted from only offering good quality and prices to providing distinctive dining experiences (Ong et al., 2018). Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that according to Mandil (2016) and Ong et al. (2018), there is a noticeable lack of research on brand experience compared to customer experience within the restaurant industry. This observation is further validated by an extensive review of the current literature on this subject for the present dissertation. Therefore, within the restaurant sector, customer experience studies often overlook the potential for experiences deriving from sensations, emotions, behaviours, and intellect in the context of branding. However, since distinctive brand experiences will provide a long-lasting competitive advantage in the restaurant sector, it is crucial to consider experiences based on the brand rather than just from the viewpoint of the customer (Ong et al., 2018). Hence, despite the lack of research, this section will attempt to elaborate on brand experiences in restaurants, mainly relying on the works of Khan and Fatma (2017), Mandil (2016), and Ong et al. (2018).

To begin with, considering that this dissertation focuses on restaurants, it is necessary to discuss the significance of brand experiences in a service-oriented environment. In fact, it is believed that brand experiences for products are typically simpler than those for services, making them easier to manage (Mosley, 2007; Nysveen et al., 2012). Mosley (2007)

explained this phenomenon by highlighting the degree of complexity required in service-oriented businesses. This complexity might be approached from two perspectives: managing the numerous services they provide (operational complexity) and dealing with interactions with customers (interpersonal complexity). The first is concerned with the variety and steps in their services, while the second is concerned with the quality of relationships and understanding client demands (Mosley, 2007). Moreover, services also differ from products in terms of intangibility (less or even no physical presence); inseparability (providing and consuming services simultaneously); heterogeneity (service performance variation, no place to standardise); and perishability (cannot be stored for future use) (Mandil, 2016; Nysveen et al., 2012). Nonetheless, Mandil (2016) highlighted that services can actually act as a link between products and experiences. As we move from basic to more experiential services, there is more interaction with employees, greater personal touch, and more customization options (Mandil, 2016). This also aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) work, where they observed a shift from product orientation to services, and eventually to experiences. Thus, services, due to their complex nature, involve interactions with customers on multiple levels, which are in fact central to the concept of experience. All of these characteristics draw attention to the necessity to focus more on service-based brand experiences, as they could be more relevant for understanding brand experiences than product-based ones (Mandil, 2016).

As highlighted earlier, in the restaurant context, diners of today value not only practical, but also symbolic aspects, making the dining experience essential for their return visits (Ong et al., 2018). Moreover, Khan and Fatma's (2017) empirical study offers other interesting insights regarding this concept in the context of restaurants. They stated that customers choose restaurants not just to meet their immediate needs, but also to have a delightful brand experience, which could actually be enhanced by several brand clues. The brand clues examined in this research were "the quality of food, order-handling system, ambience, and behaviour and appearance of the staff" (Khan & Fatma, 2017, p. 448-449). The results suggested that a restaurant brand is more likely to provide customers with a favourable brand experience if it has high-quality cuisine, an effective order-handling system, a relaxing atmosphere, and well-trained employees who exhibit appropriate behaviour and appearance. Besides these brand clues, they revealed that diners are more inclined to visit a restaurant for a new brand experience if they find the marketing messages appealing. Hence, marketers

should create campaigns that are both meaningful and emotionally engaging. Moreover, customers now rely more on websites for gathering information, so it is important to update these sites as well. Finally, the significance of organising thematic events (e.g., charity fundraisers) that might elicit pleasant emotions was noted as a way businesses can strengthen the connection between the brand and customers (Khan & Fatma, 2017).

Consequently, as seen previously, restaurant managers should prioritise offering unique and memorable brand experiences. Such experiences not only enhance marketing success, but also foster trust, customer satisfaction, loyalty, positive brand attitude, word-of-mouth, and heightened brand credibility (Khan & Fatma, 2017).

In conclusion, in the competitive landscape of the restaurant industry, proper branding and brand management are inevitable. Moreover, although still in its infancy, the notion of brand experience has gained significant importance in recent years due to shifts in customers' attitudes and preferences. As society enters the 'experience economy', brands are focusing more on creating memorable experiences rather than just offering simple products and services, highlighting the importance of connecting emotionally with today's customers. However, brand experiences will become especially critical for restaurants due to their multidimensional nature. In fact, as a restaurant's brand strategy needs to encompass all visible aspects that customers interact with, plating can be considered a brand-related stimulus. This makes it relevant to study whether aesthetic plating can contribute to the overall brand experience of diners. Therefore, given the pivotal role of brand experiences in the restaurant sector, the following methodology section will delve into examining whether aesthetic plating in restaurants can significantly enhance these brand experiences.

## **II. EMPIRICAL STUDY**

In order to examine the relationship between the visual presentation of food in restaurants and brand experience, the following part's objective is to provide a clear understanding of the methodological approach chosen for the present dissertation. It will start by addressing the significance of the research, then move on to present the research questions and objectives. The upcoming sections will detail the selected research design, followed by a separate discussion on data collection methods including sampling, location and setting, moderation, and finally ethical considerations. The chapter will then conclude with techniques for measurement and analysis used to process the gathered data.

### **5. Methodology**

#### **5.1 Research Relevance**

The exploration of how the visual presentation of food in restaurants impacts brand experience holds significant academic and practical value. Based on the literature review taken for this dissertation, three underlying reasons have emerged that determine the relevance of this research topic.

Firstly, it is the shift to dining out as a leisure time activity. Dining, which was traditionally an at-home activity, has evolved into a leisure activity, as previously said. This shift implies that restaurants have been integrated into individuals' social lives, serving as locations not only for the necessity to eat, but also for experiences (Astuti & Hanan, 2016; Fieldhouse, 1996). This trend indicates a shift in customer behaviour in which dining out is no longer just about the food. It is about the entire experience, including atmosphere, music, lighting, and even the visual presentation of food (Merckaert, 2023b). As a result, marketing techniques have become increasingly vital in highlighting and enhancing these elements to attract customers.

Secondly, it is the growing importance of plating. The phrase 'we eat first with our eyes', has never been more accurate, as the visual appeal of food has taken centre stage in recent years (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Michel et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2016). It is believed that the presentation of food may substantially improve the dining experience of individuals (Cifci et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2014). Furthermore, this significance is heightened in the digital era, as posting meals on platforms such as Instagram has become commonplace,

leading to an increased focus on food aesthetics (Spence et al., 2016). Thus, food plating is a contemporaneous phenomenon that is worth analysing.

Thirdly, it is the rising significance of brand experiences. Contemporary customers are not only rational decision makers; they are also driven by emotions, seeking out experiences that stimulate their senses, resonate with their lifestyles, and, more importantly, leave lasting memories (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Hwang et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2017; Schmitt et al., 2014). In such a landscape, brand experiences have not just become vital but are also ideal differentiating factors for success. This is especially relevant in the restaurant industry. The increasing popularity of dining out has also led to intense competition in the restaurant industry (McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023). Hence, restaurants, as well as brands, are now in a race to offer unique dining experiences beyond just good food and pricing and attempt to cater to both rational and emotional aspects of diners.

In addition, it is crucial to highlight that while there is considerable study on either the art of food plating or brand experience separately, there is a huge gap in exploring their relationship to one another. In fact, as far as the author of the present dissertation is aware, no study has been found that investigates the direct relationship between restaurants' food presentation and any brand constructs. Hence, this study intends to provide relevant insights into academic literature, helping to narrow this gap.

## **5.2 Research Questions and Goals**

The main goal of the present dissertation is to explore the relationship between food presentation, especially restaurant plating, and its impact on the multidimensional concept of brand experience. Nonetheless, before laying out the research questions, it is crucial to note that this study adopts an exploratory approach. This is primarily because it was found that no earlier research has delved into the link between the two unique concepts of food plating and brand experience. Therefore, due to the above reasons, no hypotheses will be present in this research.

Reflecting on the literature review and the notable work of Brakus et al. (2009), brand experience may be broken down into four separate dimensions: sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual. In order to fully understand each dimension's interaction with food plates, this breakdown calls for a detailed investigation into each one. As a result, the

present dissertation has one primary research question, which is followed by complementary, and more specific research questions for each dimension as the investigation progresses:

**Primary Research Question:**

- *RQ1: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the overall brand experience of diners?*

**Complementary Research Questions:**

- *RQ1A: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the sensory brand experience of diners?*
- *RQ1B: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the affective brand experience of diners?*
- *RQ1C: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the behavioural brand experience of diners?*
- *RQ1D: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the intellectual brand experience of diners?*

Thus, by providing insights about how food plating influences sensory, affective, cognitive, and behavioural experiences, the present study hopes to contribute to the area by providing insights on how visual food presentation might improve the dining experience. Hence, it attempts to hopefully offer a richer perspective on the restaurant industry, benefiting restaurant operators, chefs, and marketing experts.

### **5.3 Research Design**

In developing the research design for this study, it is essential to consider the philosophical worldview that will guide the research. Even though philosophical ideas are often hidden and not immediately apparent in research, they are crucial in determining the approach and must be acknowledged. Understanding these notions may help researchers decide whether to use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approaches for their research (Creswell, 2017). Taking into account the four distinct worldviews identified by Creswell (2017) – postpositivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism – the present dissertation has adopted the social constructivist approach.

Social constructivists believe that individuals actively attempt to make sense of the environment in which they live and engage. They construct personal interpretations of their experiences, assigning special meaning to certain objects or situations. These interpretations might vary greatly, requiring the researcher to explore the diverse and complex views rather than seek to reduce them into narrow categories or notions. Therefore, the emphasis of this research technique is on giving as much significance as possible to the perspectives of individuals engaged in a particular situation (Creswell, 2017).

Moreover, social constructivism is frequently paired with interpretivism (Creswell, 2017; Schwandt, 1994; Van der Walt, 2020). Similarly, interpretivists hold the view that reality is not determined in an objective manner but is instead shaped through social constructions (Kelliher, 2005; Walsham, 2006). Its goal is to delve into specific insights rather than attempt to construct rigid and universal norms that may be applied generally, regardless of certain critical factors and aspects (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Thus, this research approach focuses on the particular qualities of a given scenario with the goal of uncovering significant contextual understanding (Kelliher, 2005).

Nonetheless, the fact that the study is exploratory in nature might also have an impact on the choice of research design. Exploratory research is typically carried out when a researcher has little prior information about a topic or issue, particularly when pursuing a new interest or delving into a subject that is unexplored (Babbie, 2011; Hair et al., 2020). It aims to uncover new connections, themes, and patterns, rather than testing particular research hypotheses (Hair et al., 2020).

Considering the taken philosophical worldview, social constructivism and interpretivism are often used as approaches to qualitative research (Creswell, 2017; Kelliher, 2005). Furthermore, exploratory research depends more on qualitative methods, such as focus groups or facilitated small-group conversations (Babbie, 2011; Creswell, 2017; Hair et al., 2020; Mainardes et al., 2010). Consequently, in view of the above information, the present dissertation has applied a qualitative research design, since it aligns best with the topic of the study. A broad definition of qualitative research could be an investigation that draws conclusions not through the use of statistical or quantitative techniques but rather from observation in settings where the topic or phenomenon being studied happens naturally.

Contrary to quantitative researchers, who aim to establish causation, make predictions, and generalise their results, qualitative researchers aim to provide insight and comprehension, and apply that understanding to situations that are similar (Golafshani, 2003). According to Fossey et al. (2002), qualitative research questions rely on three main domains: using language to examine communication methods and interaction patterns within specific social groups; analysing and interpreting the personal meanings assigned to scenarios and actions; and developing theories by identifying relationships and trends in qualitative data. Moreover, rather than focusing on specific hypotheses that must be tested, these studies usually begin with more broad questions that guide the early exploration (Fossey et al., 2002). Therefore, researchers who use qualitative methods strive to provide a detailed picture of the subject or problem they are studying. This entails presenting a variety of viewpoints, highlighting the several contributing variables to a given circumstance, and generally outlining the bigger picture that develops (Creswell, 2017). Qualitative data is typically gathered through unstructured techniques such as interviews or observations, including methods like focus groups and in-depth interviews. Instead of using numbers, this data is collected through the documentation of words, phrases, and sometimes even visuals (Hair et al., 2020).

#### **5.4 Data Collection Method: Focus Groups**

For the present dissertation, qualitative focus groups were selected as a data gathering technique, allowing for a deep dive into the complex theme of food plating and brand experience and aiding in the explanation of respondents' perspectives and opinions. According to Powell and Single (1996, p. 499), "focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research." It is a research approach that uses guided, interactive conversation to provide detailed knowledge regarding complicated experiences and explanations behind someone's beliefs, behaviours, perceptions, and attitudes (Powell & Single, 1996). Therefore, focus groups enable researchers to investigate how and why individuals think about a specific topic, providing insights into their viewpoints and priorities. By fostering direct engagement with significant individuals, this strategy brings the researcher closer to the topic, making it simpler to understand their points of view (Lane et al., 2001). Furthermore, Babbie (2011) has identified some of the main advantages of this data collection method. Firstly, this method is known for collecting real-life information in

social settings, making it more connected to how people truly think and behave. Its flexibility allows it to be easily adapted to different scenarios and situations. Moreover, the method appears to be both effective and trustworthy in its purpose, contributing to the study's validity. Adding to its benefits, this technique can provide quick results and is also considered to be a more cost-effective option among other methods. Finally, dynamics within a group often reveal aspects of the issue that the researcher would not expect to see if they were just talking to one person at a time (Babbie, 2011).

#### **5.4.1 Sample**

A focus group usually consists of 5 to 15 people who assemble in a casual, private environment to engage in a directed conversation about a given topic (Babbie, 2011). Due to the relatively small number of participants in a group and the fact that a session with the same people only occurs once, it is not enough to fully explore a subject with just one discussion. Hence, it is advised to have at least three to four focus group meetings (Nyumba et al., 2018). Furthermore, focus group participants are very unlikely to be selected using strict probability sampling techniques (Babbie, 2011). Utilising random sampling may result in a small and unrepresentative sample of replies, and individuals picked randomly may be less relevant or accessible than those chosen through purposeful sampling. Furthermore, identifying randomly selected respondents may be difficult, and such individuals may be uninterested in the issue under investigation (Lane et al., 2001). Consequently, focus groups often utilise purposive sampling, where participants are selected for their relevance to the specific study project rather than for their representativeness (Hair et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2001). The limitations of this sampling technique are acknowledged, given that focus groups do not usually provide a statistical representation of a broader population. Nevertheless, the goal of such studies is often exploratory, not aimed at definitive descriptions or explanations (Babbie, 2011). Moreover, purposive sampling also tends to yield rich data that reflect, to a significant extent, the characteristics of the population from which the sample is drawn (Lane et al., 2001). However, as mentioned earlier, in order to avoid the risk of unrepresentative insights from a single small group, multiple focus groups are typically used in a study (Babbie, 2011).

The present dissertation has conducted three focus groups in Hungary, with three groups of five participants, including both males and females. Although they came from various

educational and professional backgrounds, the unifying characteristic among all participants was that they were all members of Generation Z and were all from Hungary.

It is important to highlight that members of Generation Z highly value authentic brand experiences. In fact, they are typically more inclined towards creating memories and engaging in experiences rather than acquiring material possessions (Inphantry, 2017). This generation seeks pleasure in experiences that are not limited to large-scale concerts or travels; they seek enjoyment in experiences that are part of everyday life as well (We Are Collider, 2022). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, more than half of Generation Z, along with Millennials, increased their frequency of eating breakfast at food service establishments, making brunch an ideal opportunity to suit their demands and help food service firms create a loyal client base among them (Future Food Strategy Group, 2018; Mintel, 2022). In addition, unique, relatable, and photogenic food experiences are highly valued by Generation Z. They seek out new and appealing meals that not only satisfy their taste but are also suitable for sharing on social media, reflecting their enthusiasm to capture and share these experiences with others (Campisi, 2022; McLymont, 2022).

Consequently, due to the above reasons, Generation Z with a Hungarian nationality was chosen to be the target of this dissertation in order to narrow down the scope of the study. The following tables (see Tables 1, 2, and 3) present an overview of the participants involved in the focus groups. This includes key information such as their age, sex, and occupation. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, their identities have been anonymized. Participants are identified by a unique code, comprising the number of the focus group they participated in (either 1, 2, or 3), followed by a specific number assigned to them within that group.

**Table 1 – Participants of Focus Group 1.**

<b>FOCUS GROUP 1</b>			
<i>ID</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>SEX</i>	<i>OCCUPATION</i>
1.1	25	Female	UX/UI design MSc student and worker
1.2	25	Male	Governmental advisor
1.3	24	Male	Electrical engineer
1.4	23	Female	VAT coordinator
1.5	24	Female	Project manager

**Table 2 – Participants of Focus Group 2.**

<b>FOCUS GROUP 2</b>			
<b>ID</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>
2.1	23	Male	Business Informatics BSc student
2.2	24	Female	Accountant
2.3	24	Female	Public servant
2.4	23	Female	Make-up artist
2.5	24	Male	Economist

**Table 3 – Participants of Focus Group 3.**

<b>FOCUS GROUP 3</b>			
<b>ID</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>
3.1	24	Female	Content creator
3.2	24	Female	Psychology MSc student
3.3	23	Female	Hospitality and tourism BSc student
3.4	25	Male	Salesperson
3.5	24	Female	Landscape architect

#### **5.4.2 Location and Setting**

Qualitative researchers often collect data directly from the setting where participants encounter the topic or problem under study. Hence, one characteristic of qualitative research is its practical approach, which involves interacting with people and studying their behaviour in more natural surroundings (Creswell, 2017). Considering the methodology of the present dissertation, one specific restaurant was intentionally chosen as the study’s centre in order to examine how plating may possibly influence brand experiences. The participants were invited to a brunch at this restaurant prior to the focus group talks. This was intended to provide the participants with a practical, real-world experience, guaranteeing a richer, more in-depth conversation during the focus group meetings.

Given the geographical focus of the research, the study was situated in Hungary, specifically in its capital, Budapest. A well-known brunch restaurant in the city was chosen, which served as the ideal venue for the research, since the brand not only represents the contemporary brunch trends in Budapest, but also provides an appropriate setting to examine the relationship between food plating and brand experiences. Although the restaurant opened its doors in the heart of Budapest only at the beginning of 2023, it quickly gained popularity with its entrance in a lively environment of the city, aiming to attract tourists visiting

Budapest, employees from the neighbourhood, as well as local customers from various age groups. Regarding the food, the restaurant has an all-day breakfast; hence, customers can enjoy various breakfast options throughout the day, which is, in fact, rare among other brunch restaurants in Budapest. The menu has something for every taste, from more traditional breakfast favourites like eggs Benedict, English breakfast, or pancakes to more special ones like Croque Madame and Monsieur, beetroot hummus toast with avocado, or coconut chia pudding with fresh tropical fruits.

Nevertheless, when it comes to focus groups, it is critical to choose an appropriate location for the discussions. Researchers must prioritise participants' comfort, the accessibility of the location, and minimum distractions during the conversation (Nyumba et al., 2018). Therefore, right after dining at the chosen restaurant, the focus group discussions took place in an apartment nearby, where participants could freely express their opinions about the dining experience in a comfortable and quiet setting.

### **5.4.3 Moderation**

A moderator is essential when conducting focus groups for several reasons. Firstly, when conducting such discussions, the moderator establishes a neutral and inviting environment that encourages participation, ensuring that every participant feels comfortable sharing their opinions (Hair et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2001). This includes facilitating more reserved people's involvement while moderating and balancing input from more dominant members (Babbie, 2011; Hair et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2001). Moreover, moderators not only encourage the discussion but also maintain the conversation's direction and focus. Hence, they are responsible for directing the conversation in a logical order while also making sure that all subjects are fully addressed. In order to ensure this, the use of a pre-written discussion guide is crucial, which includes all the important topics for discussion that the group should cover. It is also believed that focus groups are popular semi-structured interview techniques. Semi-structured interviews follow a general structure but also allow room for more spontaneous questions, which might provide unexpected and significant insights, enriching the outcomes of the study (Hair et al., 2020). In the context of this study, the moderation of the focus groups was carried out by the author of the present dissertation.

#### **5.4.4 Data Strategy**

Therefore, in order to collect data from participants, the present dissertation has relied on a pre-written script for the focus group sessions, which consisted of five different sections:

- Introduction to the study
- Warm-up questions
- General questions about the appreciation of aesthetic food plating
- Questions about the overall dining experience in the chosen restaurant
- Questions about the brand experience in the chosen restaurant (sensory, affective, behavioural, intellectual)

The introduction section opened with a brief overview of the research issue, ensuring that participants understood the main topic and objective of the conversation. Participants were informed that the session would be recorded in order to ensure transparency and ethical considerations. Moreover, the ground principles were established in order to ensure a respectful and open discussion. These guidelines highlighted the need for not interrupting others, accepting that all points of view are valid, and knowing that there are no right or wrong answers. To build a personal connection, participants were also asked to introduce themselves by stating their name, age, and occupation.

The warm-up section functioned as an icebreaker, enabling participants to speak freely about their personal dining habits. The questions focused on how frequently they eat out, their preference for brunch, and the factors they consider when selecting a restaurant. This set the tone for more in-depth conversations regarding the visual presentation of food and participants' dining experience at the chosen restaurant.

The section where participants were asked about their general appreciation of aesthetic food plating was in fact inspired by the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics (CVPA) scale developed by Bloch et al. (2003). Within their study, they highlighted that although efforts to produce goods with appealing forms have historically been present, there is now a greater emphasis on product design as consumers increasingly base their brand choices on aesthetic value and the distinctiveness of visual design (Bloch et al., 2003). Regarding their developed scale, they defined the centrality of visual product aesthetics (CVPA) “as the overall level of significance that visual aesthetics hold for a particular consumer in his/her relationships

with products” (Bloch et al., 2003, p. 552). Furthermore, CVPA has three distinct dimensions: aesthetic value, acumen, and responses. Aesthetic value refers to the perceived importance of a product’s visual attractiveness. Acumen denotes the ability to recognise and evaluate product aesthetics. On the other hand, responses refer to behavioural results in response to product designs, such as the tendency for impulse purchases (Bloch et al., 2003; Kim, 2010). Hence, diving deeper into the core theme of the research, this section was crafted to discover how important aesthetic appeal is to participants’ dining choices and experiences. Using Bloch et al.’s (2003) CVPA scale as a guide, the questions were adjusted to the context of food presentation. Participants were asked how much they value appealing food and if it improves their eating experience. They also discussed whether they were drawn to specific meals or locations just based on the appearance of the food. Finally, they considered whether an appealing food presentation would encourage them to recommend the restaurant or return to it.

Moreover, the following section was meant to evaluate participants’ first-hand experience at the chosen restaurant. They were asked to consider and express their overall thoughts about the recent visit. After that, the topic of visual appeal came up as individuals expressed their opinions on how their ordered meals were presented. They were also asked if any elements of the meal presentation caught their attention. Participants next discussed their thoughts on whether they believed that the meal presentation was a defining characteristic of the restaurant.

Finally, drawing inspiration from Brakus et al.’s (2009) brand experience framework (see chapter 4), this section of the discussion aimed to discover the four distinct dimensions of guests’ experiences at the restaurant and thus reveal a more holistic view of the brand experience at the restaurant. Starting off with the sensory dimension, participants were encouraged to consider the sensory aspects of their dining experience. Questions revolved around how the dining appealed to their senses and whether it offered a sensory-rich atmosphere. A vital part of this inquiry was understanding how the presentation of food at the restaurant enhanced or influenced their sensory engagement. Moving on to the affective dimension, within this part, the emotional connection between the guests and the restaurant’s brand was examined. Participants were asked about the feelings and emotions they encountered while dining. Their reflections on how the restaurant’s food presentation might have shaped or deepened their emotional ties with the brand were also discussed. The

behavioural dimension emphasised the tangible actions and interactions of the diners during their visit. This part explored whether diners felt compelled to capture their experiences, such as by taking photos or writing reviews. It was also essential to assess how the restaurant's food presentation might have influenced guests' activities or engagements. Lastly, the conversation delved into the intellectual dimension of the dining experience. Participants were asked if their time at the restaurant sparked their curiosity or offered fresh perspectives on dining. This part also aimed to understand if the restaurant's plating style played a role in stimulating such intellectual reflections.

#### **5.4.5 Ethical Consideration**

Researchers must be proactive and identify possible ethical issues in their research, particularly when they collect data from individuals (Creswell, 2017). Hair et al. (2020) emphasise that researchers must address four key ethical concerns, including disclosure and engagement, informed consent, harm prevention, and privacy protection. Disclosure and engagement mean that the study's purpose should be clearly communicated to participants. Furthermore, individuals should provide informed consent for their participation and for the utilisation of the data they provide. Additionally, the researcher has a duty to ensure participants' safety and well-being. Finally, the privacy of the participants must be safeguarded, ensuring data is used solely for the intended objectives of the research (Hair et al., 2020).

Consequently, the ethical issues were addressed with high consideration in the present dissertation. Before starting the focus groups, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's primary objectives. This transparency ensured they had a clear understanding of the context and intent of the research. Moreover, every participant gave their written consent for the discussions to be recorded. It was also made clear that the information gathered would only be used to comprehend their viewpoints and would support a dissertation written at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. In order to protect participants' confidentiality, it was communicated that the recordings, names, or any other information would not be disclosed outside the scope of the study. Additionally, the focus group moderator made conscious efforts to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, which facilitated an open and easy-going discussion. By adopting these measures, the research intended to ensure the respect and safety of all participants.

Furthermore, as part of the ethical considerations of the present dissertation, in order to respect and protect the identity of the restaurant under study, further measures of confidentiality were taken. To avoid potential reputation issues, the actual name of the restaurant has been changed. Hence, throughout the paper, it will be referred to as 'Berries & Bite Brunch'. There are two main reasons for this change. Firstly, it allows participants in the focus groups to share their opinions openly and honestly, without concern for any possible impact on the restaurant. Secondly, it meets ethical research standards by ensuring the establishment's identity remains confidential and protected from any negative opinions that may arise from the study's findings. However, it is important to note that while the name is changed, the feedback and observations from the focus groups are based on real experiences and should be considered genuine and valuable for the purpose of this research. Additionally, while the fictional name chosen for the restaurant might be identical with real establishments, any such similarity is purely coincidental, and there is no connection or relation between the establishment studied in this research and any existing entities.

#### **5.4.6 Data Analysis**

After the focus group discussions, which were audio recorded, the sessions were later transcribed to start a thorough analysis for the dissertation. It is important to note that the focus groups were conducted in Hungarian. Thus, to make the data universally accessible and to align it with the language of this dissertation, the transcriptions were then carefully translated into English.

Data analysis plays a critical role in the validity of qualitative research. In this setting, the researcher frequently functions as an instrumental figure, responsible for recognising and interpreting participant perceptions and experiences within certain contexts. Nonetheless, although qualitative analysis is extensively studied from a theoretical standpoint, researchers often struggle with its data analysis and practical application. (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). As a matter of fact, even though focus groups are commonly used, one common criticism is that they frequently lack clear guidance on how to analyse and understand the data. This could happen since it is widely accepted that the method by which a researcher analyses data varies based on what is being investigated (Massey, 2011). Therefore, after evaluating multiple qualitative data analysis methods and to ensure a high-quality analysis, this

dissertation decided to employ thematic analysis for interpreting the focus group discussions, as it is considered to be the most appropriate technique for the subject matter.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Regarding focus groups, this technique implies that the analysis focuses on identifying common themes from group dynamics and participant interaction. The identified themes may include personal attitudes, ideas, beliefs, and even unspoken societal conventions and values (Massey, 2011). Thus, rather than focusing on numerical metrics, researchers using thematic analysis explore whether the collected data provides meaningful insights to address the research question (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined a comprehensive six-step framework to guide researchers through the process of conducting thematic analysis. The steps are as follows:

1. Becoming familiar with the data: transcribing and reading through the collected material.
2. Creating initial codes: applying codes to identify interesting parts of the data and gathering related codes and sections together.
3. Discovering themes: sorting codes into themes and collecting any information that might be relevant to each identified theme.
4. Reviewing identified themes: evaluating if the themes work with the coded parts and the whole set of data, making a ‘map’ of the analysis based on the themes.
5. Naming and defining topics: improving the details of each theme and the narrative that the analysis gives as a whole, giving each theme a clear name and meaning.
6. Writing narrative: writing up the final analysis narrative based on the set of developed themes and codes within them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the present dissertation, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis is followed. However, a slight modification is made in the sequence of steps to align more closely with the pre-established focus group script. Specifically, the script already encompasses clear guidelines and overarching themes for discussion, allowing for a quicker approach to step three, ‘Discovering themes’. Thus, the pre-defined themes in the focus group script will serve as the foundation for step two, thereby pushing the ‘Discovering themes’ stage earlier in the analysis process. This approach aims to ensure a more efficient

thematic analysis, as the major themes for exploration have been predetermined and can be followed in chronological order.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following part of the present dissertation is going to focus on revealing and evaluating the data gathered during the focus group discussions, which enables addressing the main research questions regarding the influence of food presentation on brand experience in restaurants. The ‘Findings’ section will present the collected data in a systematic manner, highlighting key themes and observations. Afterwards, the ‘Discussion’ section will delve into the analysis of these findings, contextualising them within existing literature and providing insights into their implications. As a result, this part seeks to provide comprehensive knowledge of the study’s research questions and objectives.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Eating Out Habits

The focus group discussions began with an exploration of participants’ eating out habits. This theme aims to demonstrate the frequency of eating out and the preferred occasions for such activities. Based on the collected data, the frequency with which participants eat out varies greatly; some consider it a more regular, everyday habit, while others save it for special occasions and events. Moreover, workplace habits and dining out frequently overlap, with many people choosing to eat at on-site cafeterias or nearby restaurants. This was highlighted by various participants, more specifically by *Participants 1.2, 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5*. For instance, *Participant 1.2* mentioned, “I eat at least five times a week in restaurants, or even more, as I don’t really eat at home.” Similarly, *Participant 2.4* noted, “I eat out pretty frequently, like once or twice a week with friends. And I also always eat at the restaurant at my workplace.”

On the other hand, *Participant 2.5* said, “I usually only eat at restaurants on special occasions like family gatherings, birthdays, etc., once or twice a month.” Also, *Participant 3.3* mentioned, “I go to restaurants mostly on occasions, when I celebrate”. However, only these two focus group participants – who view eating out as an occasional, unique activity rather than a regular habit – shared this viewpoint out of all the participants.

Furthermore, the occasions on which participants choose to eat out vary, including both special events and more everyday activities. Many participants mentioned that they eat out

to celebrate birthdays or family gatherings, but they also see dining out as a part of their social life with their partners and friends, so they even consider it as a leisure time activity. For example, *Participant 1.1* explained, “I think I eat out once or twice a week with my friends or on a date with my boyfriend, but I also really like to celebrate special events like birthdays in restaurants.” Her perspective indicated that eating out can serve both as a routine social activity and as a way to celebrate special occasions.

Interestingly, *Participants 3.1* and *3.2* expressed an even more habitual approach to eating out. They perceive dining out not merely as a leisure time option, but more as an integral part of their lifestyle. *Participant 3.1* confessed:

Oh, it kind of makes me feel guilty, because I eat out pretty often, especially now in the summer with holidays, I always eat out... I’m quite a hedonist regarding food, I love it very much, so I eat out often.

*Participant 3.2* added, “It’s a leisure time activity and an experience, so it’s not just for occasions for me, it’s part of my everyday life, like I eat out once every day in some form.”

In addition, *Participant 3.5* shared the following viewpoint:

... I also like cooking, so I do it a lot at home, and it’s also more cost-efficient. So, when I do go to restaurants, I like to have a good experience with some meals I would not be able to prepare at home.

Her comment reflects the idea that for some, eating out is not just about the food but also about the unique experience that restaurants can offer, which they may not be able to replicate at home.

## **6.2 Factors of Restaurant Selection**

The following section of the focus group conversation focused on the factors that participants consider important when selecting a restaurant. A recurring theme across all focus groups was the variety and options of meals available on the restaurant’s menu. Participants expressed a need for a diverse selection that would satisfy various preferences and therefore make it easier to find something they would like to eat. *Participant 1.3* stated, “...I would say the selection of food is the most important one, as well as looking at the pictures of them”, and *Participant 1.2* added, “Obviously, I like to check if I even have something I would like to eat there.” Regarding this factor, a lot of participants also added the

significance of a currently updated, available online menu. This necessity was supported by *Participants 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 2.5*, as demonstrated in the table below (see Table 4).

**Table 4 – Importance of Online Menu.**

Focus group 1	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote</i>
<i>1.2</i>	An available current menu is also really important for me.
<i>1.3</i>	However, for me I would say the selection of food is the most important one, as well as looking at the pictures of them. So also obviously the online menu is a must for me as well.
<i>1.4</i>	For me it's a necessity to have the current menu uploaded, to see the prices, the selection of food, and also pictures of how the restaurants' atmosphere is and how the food itself looks like.
Focus group 2	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote</i>
<i>2.5</i>	For me it's really important to have a wide variety of food on the menu, and thus also that I can check the menu before online.

Another consistent factor was price in individuals' decision-making processes. In fact, for some participants, price often serves as an initial filter before other criteria are considered. For instance, *Participant 3.4* claimed, "I choose almost everything in a way that first I decide how much I want to pay, and then I choose something that I can afford for that amount." Furthermore, the value for money was also highlighted as a factor to look at in order to avoid overpriced places.

The overall atmosphere and ambience of a restaurant have also emerged as significant variables. It is not solely about how a restaurant feels once individuals are inside; it is also about how the ambience of the place is perceived before even entering. The ability to form initial impressions is usually based on pictures of the restaurant's interior design and even the food, which are often available online on social media platforms and other applications like Google Maps or TripAdvisor. For instance, *Participant 1.4* pointed out the necessity of getting a feel of the restaurant's atmosphere online by stating, "For me it's a necessity to have the current menu uploaded, to see the prices, the selection of food, and also pictures of how the restaurant's atmosphere is." Similarly, *Participant 2.1* claimed that "If the atmosphere is not appealing, then I'm not going there."

Furthermore, as mentioned above, online platforms like Google Maps were recurrently cited as valuable tools for evaluating various aspects of restaurants, from their location, ambience, and food selection to customer reviews. The application of Google Maps was mentioned by multiple participants, including *Participants 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, and 3.1*, as visible in the table below (see Table 5).

**Table 5 – Use of Google Maps in Restaurant Evaluation.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Quote (see Appendix B)
1.1	Also, the reviews are super important for me on Google Maps.
1.3	I join everyone else here, Google Maps is really handy when it comes to picking restaurants.
1.4	I always check Google Maps before going somewhere.
1.5	I agree with the others, nowadays I really don't go to a restaurant before checking it on Google Maps.
Focus group 2	
ID	Quote (see Appendix C)
2.1	I always check on Google Maps.
2.2	...it's the recommendations for me too. And not only from friends or family, but also maybe on Google Maps or Trip Advisor. I think this way you can really find amazing restaurants.
Focus group 3	
ID	Quote (see Appendix D)
3.1	I think I always look at the ratings on Google Maps, like if I want to eat out somewhere, I look up where are the closest possibilities, I look at the pictures, 'do I like their pictures?', 'does the place look good?', I read some reviews, and I choose based on that.

However, as seen in the above table, ratings on such applications were also highlighted by some participants. For instance, *Participant 1.1* stated clearly her reliance on reviews, saying:

If I see bad reviews somewhere, I really trust them and don't go to the place. I would say if there's at least five bad reviews I just don't go. I don't want to waste my money on a bad experience.

Finally, the last factor that was mentioned by multiple participants were recommendations from family, friends, and acquaintances. This points out more trusted and reliable sources. For example, *Participant 3.2* highlighted it as the most important factor, claiming that "If someone already said that 'Oh, this one's really good!', then I'm more likely to try it, because

I feel like I have to experience it too.” This viewpoint was also supported by *Participants 2.2* and *2.4*.

### 6.3 Perceptions and Practices regarding Brunch

Since the dissertation was focusing on brunch restaurants, the focus group sessions have also included questions regarding perceptions and practices of brunch, as presented previously. First of all, there was a universal appreciation for the food served at brunch restaurants across all three focus groups. The participants spoke emphatically about how much they enjoy the offerings of typical brunch menus. *Participant 1.4* sums up this sentiment by saying, “Brunch food is literally the best.” Moreover, *Participant 1.1* said, “To be honest, I could also eat these kinds of foods for breakfast, lunch or even dinner.” Or *Participant 2.3* claimed, “I love the food and ambience of brunch restaurants.” This love for brunch food is not limited to any particular participants; the viewpoint was echoed in all groups.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that while all participants like the idea of brunch, their habits surrounding it vary. Some participants only go to brunch restaurants while on vacation, as stated by multiple participants, specifically by *Participants 1.1, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5,* and *3.1*. These sentiments are presented in the table below (see Table 6).

**Table 6 – Connection of Brunch to Holidays and Vacation.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Quote (see Appendix B)
1.1	...I think I go the most when I’m on vacation, and I have more freedom as I don’t have to work.
1.5	I think I also go much more when I’m on vacation, as I treat myself more on those occasions.
Focus group 2	
ID	Quote (see Appendix C)
2.1	...it’s not a well-known concept in Hungary, it doesn’t have its culture here yet like abroad. So I think I mostly do it abroad on holidays.
2.2	Oh yeah, me too when I’m abroad. It’s perfect to start the day with a brunch in a foreign city.
2.5	I mostly go to brunch restaurants when I’m abroad. I really connect it with pleasure and holidays.
Focus group 3	
ID	Quote (see Appendix D)

3.1	What's interesting is that I tend to connect brunch with vacations and travelling, so I don't even know a lot of brunch places here, where I live. I don't really think at home 'Oh let's go have a brunch' ever, but when I travel somewhere I kind of need at least one or two brunches. I think it's part of the experience, it starts the day, it's cozy and chill, like you get a main dish but it's a breakfast, so yeah, I really like it.
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However, *Participant 1.5* claimed that besides vacation, she also enjoys brunch more frequently, particularly on weekends. These varying habits indicate that while brunch meals are liked across all groups, it is not always practiced, often due to logistical issues like work schedules and therefore the overall timing of brunches. *Participant 3.5* clearly expressed this perspective by stating that:

...breakfast is my favourite meal, so it's nice to do it properly, like a big breakfast dish to start the day. However, it rarely happens that I have the time to go to a brunch restaurant at like eleven in the morning, because of work it's hard to have a 'slow morning', but still, I like it very much.

Furthermore, *Participant 1.4* said it is "hard to find occasion when you have a job." Therefore, various participants highlighted that it is kind of difficult to find the time to go brunching.

Furthermore, it was clear that brunch is more than just about food; it is also a cultural phenomenon. Participants acknowledged that part of what guests pay for is the experience and atmosphere. For instance, *Participant 1.1* claimed, "...brunch restaurants are a bit overpriced, and I think the reason for this is that it has a culture." *Participant 1.3* further noted, "...they built a whole brand around having brunch, and its luxurious feeling." In addition, brunch was also mentioned as being an 'Instagrammable' occasion by *Participant 1.5*, who highlighted, "...you can post it on Instagram, or on any kind of social media and it looks amazing."

However, participants have also voiced some criticism of brunch restaurants regarding their costs. Many feel that the meals tend to be overpriced, considering the nature of the food items. For instance, *Participant 3.3* went into detail about how one could recreate the same meals at home for a fraction of the cost:

...for example, an English breakfast is: you just put beans out of a can, you make two fried eggs and bacon, and that's it. For me, it's too much, and I think here the price was kind of fine, but there are places where they are out of touch and charge whatever people may be willing to pay.

The issue of pricing seemed to be particularly about Budapest, as multiple participants noted that brunch spots in the city tend to be overpriced: “Although I don’t mind spending money on brunch, I would say that brunch places in Budapest are really overpriced” (*Participant 1.4*). Nonetheless, after talking about the prices of such restaurants, *Participant 1.2* added, “I think you kind of buy the experience of these restaurants.”

#### 6.4 Aesthetic Appreciation of Food Plating

Afterwards, the discussion shifted towards one of the most relevant themes in the present dissertation – the overall opinions of aesthetic food plating in restaurants. All participants across the three focus groups acknowledged that aesthetically pleasing plating can significantly enhance their dining experience, add extra value, and is something they appreciate in restaurants. *Participant 1.1* expressed, “For me it’s obvious that aesthetic plating influences your dining experience, and you’d eat differently a meal which is presented in a bad way.” Moreover, according to *Participant 2.3*, “It does have an added value, and I also feel like the restaurant is more precise and puts more effort into the plates as well.” Participants also felt that a well-plated dish signals precision, thereby serving as an indicator for the quality of the food, as well as the whole restaurant. This viewpoint is visible in the dialogue represented in the table below (see Table 7).

**Table 7 – Dialogue Regarding the Connection of Aesthetic Plating and Quality.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Dialogue (see Appendix B)
1.5:	...I think you can really see precision, attention to detail from the restaurant, which shows me more effort, and also would think that the restaurant has more quality food.
1.2:	Yes, I think not only the quality of the food, but also the quality of the whole restaurant and dining experience is better.

Moreover, participants revealed that appealing plating can significantly influence their appetite, increasing the likelihood of enjoying a meal. As an example, *Participant 2.1* claimed “I think it can really add to the dining experience and I always eat with more pleasure when they pay attention to the presentation as well”, or *Participant 1.4* said, “I think my appetite gets better if I see nice plating, and I would have a kind of satisfied feeling

even before starting to eat.” Additionally, *Participant 3.3* highlighted that a dining experience is a multisensory phenomenon, and all restaurants should take this into account:

I would also add, that when we eat, we obviously use multiple senses, so also smelling and seeing is activated for instance. Thus, all senses are included in a dining experience, and restaurants should pay attention to this.

*Participant 3.2* agreed with the perspective that restaurants need to pay attention to plating and should be included in the whole experience:

I also agree with this. When someone goes to a restaurant, they also pay for the experience, not just for the food. Therefore, the experience also includes plates, which has been done aesthetically and precisely, that you might not be able to do at home. Otherwise, I could also just eat food at home. So from restaurants, I expect a nice plate which adds value to the visuals, as I pay the price for it.

Furthermore, participants stated that the visual aspect of food often plays a role when deciding which restaurant to try or even which meal to choose within it. This is especially true when scrolling through online images of the restaurant or when observing what neighbouring tables have ordered. *Participant 3.1* has clearly explained this phenomenon:

I think when you look up a restaurant online, the pictures will be the ones mostly influencing your decision. Even if you notice or not, if you see a picture of a dish which was just thrown on a plate without any attention, you will not think you really want to visit that restaurant. Thus, to be honest I never thought I would go to a restaurant only for the plating, but maybe unconsciously I did multiple times.

This viewpoint was also strengthened by *Participant 2.4*, who highlighted the first impression of visual presentation of food:

Well, I think this is the first thing that gets the attention of people. For example, someone posts something, you see it, and at that time you don't know how it tastes or anything, so that's the first impression of the dish and the restaurant itself.

*Participant 3.4* also added, “A lot of times it happened to me, that I was in a restaurant, and I saw a plate there from another guest, and I just thought, I need that dish now.” This phenomenon was also mentioned by *Participant 1.5*, who said, “...when you're sitting in a restaurant and you see on the table next to you a plate, and you want to have the same dish immediately just based on the look.” In addition, this viewpoint was also supported by *Participant 1.2*, *1.3*, and *1.5*, as represented in the dialogue in the table below (see Table 8).

**Table 8 – Dialogue Regarding the Power of Visuals.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Dialogue (see Appendix B)
1.3:	There's the feeling when my stomach doesn't want more food, but my eyes do.
1.5:	Yes, when you're completely full, but something looks so good you still want to try it.
1.2:	So when you are hungry, visuals are even more powerful.

The theme of aesthetic plating and social media was also brought up, specifically by **Participants 2.2** and **3.1**. They emphasised the role of food presentation in what they choose to share online. **Participant 2.2** stated that “I also like to post on social media quite a lot, so for me nice plating also really matters.” In addition, due to the nature of her job, the aesthetic aspect of food was essential also for **Participant 3.1**:

...as I'm a content creator, I'm posting quite a lot on social media. So, for me it's especially important to have aesthetic plates, since I would post it on Instagram, TikTok etc. If they don't look good enough, I don't post them.

However, although restaurants' food presentation may initially attract customers, participants believed that it does not determine whether they would return to the restaurant or recommend it to others. The general consensus is that while aesthetic plating contributes to the dining experience, the taste and quality of the food, the service, and the overall ambience also play a significant role in these decisions. For instance, **Participant 2.4** stated that “If for me the overall experience was good, the presentation, the flavours, the service, etc., then yes, but if the food or the service is bad, then I would not recommend only because of aesthetic plating.” Moreover, **Participant 3.4** said, “It's crucial as a first impression, but then you consider a lot of other things.” In plus, this sentiment was also appropriately expressed by **Participant 3.2** with the following statement:

I think if the food was bad, I would not revisit nor I would recommend it to someone, even if the plate was beautiful. I think looks can draw you to places, but in order to revisit and recommend a place, it matters whether the food was delicious, the staff and the ambience was good etc.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that **Participants 1.2** and **2.3** added that they would recommend a restaurant solely based on the plates to individuals who are going more for the looks when choosing places to eat out. In the first focus group, **Participant 1.2** said:

If I know that someone is really only going for the looks in a restaurant, so that she/he can post it on Instagram etc., I would recommend a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of the meal. But, as I said, it would depend on the other person.

Furthermore, in the second focus group, *Participant 2.3* claimed:

...if I know that the person loves looks and aesthetic plating, maybe I didn't like it, but I would still recommend it anyway, maybe they will have a great experience as they focus more on other factors of a dining experience.

Additionally, some participants also noted that they could disregard plating if the taste is delicious, the proportions are good, and thus also the value for money is fair. These opinions were mainly mentioned when it came to more rustic and authentic Hungarian restaurants, as well as restaurants people have known for a long time. *Participant 2.4* mentioned, "It's a totally simple, authentic place, but the food is so good, that you don't care about the presentation, you go there for the flavours – I happily go back there frequently, and it isn't because of the presentation."

However, on top of all of this, one interesting comment came up by *Participant 1.3*, who expressed that there could be extremes in food plating, especially in fine dining settings, where the visual aspects sometimes overshadow the quantity or even the food itself:

I would add that although plating is really important for me as well, and I agree with the opinions so far, I think sometimes plating can be too much as well. For example, plating in fine dining restaurants is too extreme, and I don't see the point of it.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that fine dining represents a distinct category of dining experience and was not the primary focus of this research.

## **6.5 Overall Dining Experience at Berries & Bite Brunch**

The focus group conversation continued to focus on the participants' recent experience at Berries & Bite Brunch. Most participants in all three focus groups seemed to agree on Berries & Bite Brunch's minimalistic approach to interior design and thought they could have had the potential to make it nicer even with attention to smaller details. While some did not have a problem with the more clear and simple approach, many people would have preferred a more 'cosy' or 'rustic' environment, as presented in the table below (see Table 9).

**Table 9 – Criticism Regarding the Minimalistic Design of the Restaurant.**

Focus group 1	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix B)</i>
<i>1.1</i>	I liked the restaurant, but the design of the whole place was a bit too minimalistic and trying to be fancy.
<i>1.2</i>	I would also prefer a more cozy and even rustic ambience.
<i>1.3</i>	It was a bit too minimalistic. I think it tried too hard to appeal to the youngsters.
<i>1.4</i>	I was missing a bit the cozy vibes.
Focus group 2	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix C)</i>
<i>2.2</i>	I would prefer a bit more cozy place. Unfortunately, nowadays it's becoming a thing, this more minimalistic style, without any special attention on details.
<i>2.3</i>	It could have been a bit more friendly and cozy for a brunch place, not this minimalistic.
Focus group 3	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix D)</i>
<i>3.1</i>	The design was a bit too minimalistic and just trying to appeal to a younger audience.
<i>3.2</i>	They could have made the interior much more cozy for a brunch place.
<i>3.5</i>	...the interior could have been a bit cosier.

Nonetheless, multiple participants mentioned that they actually liked the combination of colours in the interior with the colour of berries and white: “The colour of berries and white in the interior design looked pretty” (*Participant 2.4*).

Regarding the food at the restaurant, the general feeling about the food's taste and quality was positive. Participants described it as “good” (*Participant 1.2, 1.5, 2.4, 3.1, 3.5*), “really good” (*Participant 2.1*), “delicious” (*Participant 1.1, 2.5, 3.4*), or “really delicious” (*Participant 2.2*). Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that some participants mentioned afterwards that although the food was good, it was nothing extraordinary or special. For example, according to *Participant 2.5*, “The food was delicious, but nothing special, kind of average.” Additionally, *Participants 2.2, 2.3, and 3.5* mentioned that they also liked the menu and the selection of food: “I liked the menu, there was something for everyone, both sweet and salty, and still not overwhelming” (*Participant 2.2*).

As for the visual presentation of food, everyone agreed across all focus groups that the plating was visually appealing and well-executed in the restaurant. Many participants remarked on the plate’s colour harmony, pointing out how the ingredients’ vivid colours contrasted nicely with the plateware’s pastel tones. For instance, *Participant 2.1* said, “I think for me too the colours caught my attention the most: the purple beetroot hummus on my toast, and also the kind of green oil on top of the pastel white plate looked amazing for example.” *Participant 1.5* further supported this by stating, “I agree, the plating was really nice – I liked the plateware also, that they were a bit simple, pastel white colours so there was a contrast with the colourful food.” Furthermore, *Participant 2.5* stated, “I liked the overall picture of the plates – there was a good harmony on them, with the colours, shapes and also the arrangement of ingredients on the plate.” Participants also noted the precise arrangement and shaping of ingredients. *Participant 1.1* highlighted the neatly presented avocado toast: “I really liked in my avocado toast that the avocado was super nicely sliced and placed on top with some seeds – even the shape of the bread was beautiful.” Moreover, *Participant 2.3* also praised her dish: “I would also say the plate looked nice, and also the eggs Benedict with a bit of chives on top was a good touch.” In addition, participants also spoke favourably about the plateware itself, highlighting its appropriate size, shape, and colour. For instance, *Participant 2.4* claimed, “I liked the pastel white plates, it looked nice with the colourful food.” In plus, *Participant 1.5* expressed, “I also paid attention to the sizes of the plates, which were greatly selected also for each dish.”

Nonetheless, there was a general sentiment that the plating style was similar to other brunch places. Interestingly, participants also mentioned that overall, brunch restaurants tend to have the same plating style. Hence, while the plating and presentation were visually pleasing, they were not distinctive enough to set Berries & Bite Brunch apart from other brunch restaurants. This viewpoint was supported by all participants in each of the three focus groups, as presented in the table below (see Table 10). Nonetheless, it is important to note that many participants expressed agreement with the prevailing viewpoint, primarily through non-verbal cues such as nodding. As a result, not all participants are represented with direct quotes in the table.

**Table 10 – Evaluating the Uniqueness of Plating in the Restaurant.**

Focus group 1
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<b>Quote (see Appendix B)</b>	
<b>1.1</b>	Brunch restaurants tend to have the same kind of food, and also plating, even with the plateware itself.
<b>1.3</b>	Although the plating is really nice, I think brunch restaurant kind of have a pattern they follow.
<b>1.5</b>	Brunch restaurants follow more or less the same kind of plating style.
<b>Focus group 2</b>	
<b>Quote (see Appendix C)</b>	
<b>2.1</b>	I think it was beautiful, but average in a way, since all brunch restaurants go for this kind of food plating.
<b>2.4</b>	I didn't feel like it was a really special plating style, most brunch places actually have this kind.
<b>Focus group 3</b>	
<b>Quote (see Appendix D)</b>	
<b>3.5</b>	I think while the plating was nicely done, it cannot really be considered as a distinguishing characteristic, it wasn't that unique.

Finally, although participants liked the creative concept of berries and it was apparent to some degree in the logo, interior, and menu, a common suggestion across all focus groups was that the restaurant could have done more to express its berry theme, both in the décor and in the plating. For instance, participants expressed that including berries or at least the colour of berries as a consistent element in each dish could have made the restaurant's identity far more recognisable and special. The dialogue across the focus groups regarding this viewpoint is presented in the table below (see Table 11).

**Table 11 – Dialogue Regarding Participants' Feedback on Expressing the Berries Identity on Plates.**

<b>Focus group 1</b>	
<b>Dialogue (see Appendix B)</b>	
<b>1.4:</b>	What I also thought that as it is Berries & Bite Brunch, I think they could have used berries in each plate maybe. Even for salty ones I think it could have made it more special.
<b>1.2:</b>	Yes, true! Then their whole concept, and brand identity could have been seen also on the plate itself.
<b>Focus group 2</b>	
<b>Dialogue (see Appendix C)</b>	
<b>2.3:</b>	For me, I really think if they would have put berries on the plates it would have make it really creative and special.
<b>2.2:</b>	Yes, I really agree with this! Their name is Berries & Bite Brunch, they could have play with this identity a bit even on the plates.

2.5:	Yes, I really think this could have been a unique selling point of the restaurant, especially of their plating. This could have set them apart from the other brunch restaurants.
<b>Focus group 3</b>	
<b>ID</b>	<b>Dialogue (see Appendix D)</b>
3.3:	I was thinking that they could make plating easily as a distinguishing characteristic, by adding berries to each dish. That would be really special I think and no other brunch places have that.
3.1:	Yes, such a good idea! I think as most of the plates have salad on the side for instance, they could easily add a couple of berries, and could even be a plus in flavours.
3.4:	Yes, that would be a plus for sure, and a unique selling point! However, maybe it would be a bit corny at the end.
3.5:	Yes, there should be a good balance.
3.2:	But not even necessarily berries itself, maybe even just the colour of it could be there on the plates.

Nonetheless, based on the dialogues presented above, some caution was also expressed about not overdoing it, as stated by participants in the third focus group.

## 6.6 Brand Experience at Berries & Bite Brunch

The discussion continued to explore the brand experience participants encountered at Berries & Bite Brunch, encompassing the sensory, affective, behavioural, and finally intellectual dimensions of it.

### 6.6.1 Sensory Dimension

Firstly, the sensory dimension of brand experience was discussed, shedding light on the engagement of the five senses while participants dined at the restaurant. Regarding the visual experience, most participants were engaged by the visual elements of the restaurant. Elements such as the first look at the interior design, colour scheme, and wall art contributed to a visually pleasing atmosphere, though some found the amount of information on the walls a bit overwhelming. For instance, *Participant 1.2* explained:

I think for the visuals, when I first looked at the place, it seemed really unified, with a clear design. It had a pleasant look, although it didn't offer anything extra. I also think, that although it had a bit more minimalistic style, when looking at the motifs and arts on the wall, they were a bit overwhelming, I wouldn't start to read each of them.

Additionally, *Participant 2.4* suggested that in order to have a more engaging visual experience, the staff could also have worn something more berry-related in terms of the design and colours. Moreover, the presentation of food enhanced the visual experience for

diners. For instance, *Participant 1.2* expressed, “As for my sight, the plating really exceeded my expectations, visually, it really enhanced my dining experience.” Or *Participant 2.5* said, “Visually, it really made the sensory experience better.”

In relation to taste perception, participants observed that their sense of taste was obviously stimulated due to the fact that they were dining at a restaurant. As mentioned earlier, individuals gave equally positive feedback regarding the taste of their meals, indicating that they were delicious. Furthermore, according to two participants (*Participant 1.1, 2.1*) the presentation of food, influenced their appetite and enhanced their taste experience: “When I saw the food my appetite got so much better immediately, and it really engaged my sight, I think” (*Participant 2.1*). In plus, *Participant 1.1* said, “Visually, the plating really engaged me with its colours and arrangement of ingredients – I ate it with a bigger appetite and added value.”

Moving on to the hearing experience, the feedback for this sense varied a lot among the participants. While some found the background music and the noise of other diners to contribute positively to the overall atmosphere, others felt it could be overwhelming or even distracting. There were even participants who mentioned that their hearing was not engaged at all. For example, *Participant 1.2* noted, “The music was nice I think, and also the sound of other people eating and talking gave a pleasant vibe for me.” Whereas *Participant 3.3* said, “For hearing, I think the noise was a bit too loud of other people – we could barely hear each other so it was a bit irritating.” In plus, *Participant 2.2* said, “It would have been nice to have a bit more background music, I didn’t really hear anything.” Moreover, some participants noted that the auditory experience was also slightly enhanced by the plate itself, as the texture of certain foods, like crunchy elements on the plate, added a bit to the auditory dimension. For instance, *Participant 1.5* said, “Maybe another sense that I could mention is the hearing, because on my pancakes there were the fresh berries, which were more ‘crunchy’ I would say.” *Participant 2.3* further supported this by stating, “Maybe some crunchy elements on the plate engaged a bit of the hearing.” However, it is worth noting that this viewpoint was not shared among everyone, as some participants felt that the auditory experience was not enhanced by the plating.

Regarding the smelling experience, there was a general disappointment across all focus groups. Many people thought that the restaurant missed a chance to appeal to this sense,

which is often an important part of a food-related experience. People generally thought that the unique smells of freshly baked goods or coffee could have contributed to the overall ambience of the restaurant. Mainly *Participant 2.2* voiced this issue, highlighting its importance in dining experiences: "...for the smell, I really missed it – when I pass by restaurants and they have a good smell, I immediately consider going in, so that could be a huge plus actually." Moreover, *Participant 1.1* further supported this viewpoint by saying, "I also missed a bit the smell of baked goods and coffee." Additionally, there were no explicit mentions of the plating influencing the sense of smell.

Finally, the sense of touch was largely overlooked by participants, both when it came to the overall restaurant and the plating itself. *Participant 1.1* even mentioned, "Touching is not relevant, I think."

### **6.6.2 Affective Dimension**

Afterwards, the discussion continued to explore the affective dimensions of the brand experience at Berries & Bite Brunch, delving into the emotional responses and connections participants felt during their dining experience. The majority of participants felt a general sense of pleasantness when dining at the restaurant. Some even felt calm when accompanied by good food and company. Several participants also expressed a sense of excitement, particularly when selecting their meals from the menu, waiting for the arrival of their food, and ultimately, when the dishes were placed in front of them: "I got really excited when looking at the menu, because the selection of the food was great, and also just reading the ingredients of the meals made me feel hyped about the upcoming meal" (*Participant 1.4*). Moreover, *Participant 2.3* claimed, "I also felt excitement, even when looking at the menu and going through the options, and I also had a pleasant feeling throughout the brunch." Nonetheless, these feelings did not translate into a deeper emotional connection with the brand. For instance, *Participant 1.1* claimed, "I think I didn't really have any kind of deep feelings, I felt pleasant in the restaurant." In plus, *Participant 3.1* supported this viewpoint by saying, "I also had the excited feeling for eating out, but that's it, I think."

Moreover, the first focus group also expressed some negative emotions during the dining experience. *Participant 1.2* described his affective experience as follows:

I also had a pleasant feeling through the experience, and when I was looking at the food options, and even waiting for the food it made me really excited. However, I also got a little bit of more negative feelings when the waiter was a bit neutral and grumpy.

**Participant 1.5** also added, "...it can be a bit of a mood killer, when I saw that the waiter just seems to be irritated by the guests."

As for the influence of food presentation on emotions and emotional connection to the brand, for some participants, aesthetic plating was seen as an indication of the restaurant's attention to detail, which created trust and more positive feelings towards the brand. These viewpoints are presented in the table below (see Table 12).

**Table 12 – The Effect of Plating on The Sentiments Towards the Brand.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Quote (see Appendix B)
1.5	For me beautiful plating indicates attention to precision, creativity and the overall experience, so I would think more positively about the brand and trust the restaurant more.
Focus group 2	
ID	Quote (see Appendix C)
2.1	If I only take into account the plating, for me it evoked positive feelings towards the brand.
2.3	As I mentioned before, nice plating for me also represents quality and precision. This makes me have more positive and pleasant connection with the brand.
Focus group 3	
ID	Quote (see Appendix D)
3.4	I would say, I had a better feeling towards the brand as I saw they paid attention on the details of the plates. That's a good point for me.
3.5	Nice plates show quality, so more positive feelings towards the brand.

However, despite the positive emotions elicited by aesthetic food presentation, many participants agreed that Berries & Bite Brunch's plating was not unique enough to establish a deeper emotional connection. **Participant 3.2** claimed:

I wouldn't say I felt closer to the brand, as this plate can be found in most of the brunch restaurants, so I also couldn't have an emotional bond, as it was not necessarily specific to only Berries & Bite Brunch.

This was further supported by **Participant 3.5**: "I didn't feel a deep connection as it was not that special." In addition, many participants clarified that their affective experience was a

combination of several factors, such as taste, ambience, and staff interaction, rather than just the food presentation. For example, *Participant 1.2* said, “I think I got the wow feeling from the plate, but after the whole experience at the restaurant, my feelings towards the brand were influenced by various things, and I cannot narrow it down only to the plating.” Moreover, *Participant 2.4* expressed, “I think for me other factors are also really important, so although the plating was nice, it didn’t really help to build an emotional connection with the brand.”

### **6.6.3 Behavioural Dimension**

Moving along, the dialogue delved into the behavioural dimension of brand experience with Berries & Bite Brunch. One of the most frequently observed behaviours was taking photos of the meals and sharing them on social media platforms like Instagram. In fact, almost all participants across the three focus groups photographed their meals (this was observed during the actual brunch at the restaurant). The aesthetic appeal of the plates was the primary driver for this action, since those who took pictures highlighted that they only did them of the food itself: “I actually made pictures only from the plates, so that ‘behaviour’ was evoked by them” (*Participant 3.1*).

Moreover, most participants expressed that while they may not proactively recommend the restaurant or write reviews, they would share their experiences with family and friends. For instance, *Participant 2.1* claimed, “I think I would share the experience with my partner and friends.” Or, as *Participant 2.1* said, “I wouldn’t write a review, but I would tell my friends and family how the experience was if they ask about it.” Moreover, in the third focus group, *Participant 3.5* made an interesting comment when it comes to writing reviews: “Yes, I would also talk about it with my friends, but to write a review I don’t think so, to be honest, a restaurant needs to be either exceptional, or really bad for me to write a review.”

Nonetheless, the presentation of the food not only made participants take pictures, but also encouraged them to consider replicating the dishes at home. A notable number of participants indicated that the presentation of the food inspired them to try recreating the dishes at home, as presented in the table below (see Table 13).

**Table 13 – The Effect of Plating on Diners’ Inspiration to Recreate Dishes.**

Focus group 1	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix B)</i>
1.3	I thought there that I really want to try to do the eggs Benedict by myself at home.
1.5	Maybe it also inspired me to get some good fresh healthy ingredients and try to recreate the dishes myself.
Focus group 2	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix C)</i>
2.3	I also thought about recreating the plates at home. Maybe they are not that hard, the ingredients are easy to get for example.
2.4	I think these plates are easy to recreate at home, and would be cheaper for sure.
Focus group 3	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix D)</i>
3.3	I also thought about doing my plate at home.
3.4	I want to do the eggs Benedict. It’s not an everyday thing, so I think it could even be for guests.
3.5	Actually, I thought about recreating the plates at home. As I said before, sometimes I do brunch at home, and I think it could be doable!

Another interesting behaviour that was elicited by the plating was mentioned by *Participant 2.5*, who tried a meal due to the presentation of food:

Actually, now that I think about it, the plating made me try eggs Benedict. I’m not really a big fan of it, but as I saw it on *Participant 2.3*’s plate, I asked for a bite as it looked really good.

Additionally, *Participants 1.5* and *3.2* even mentioned that the information provided in the restaurant’s décor about the benefits of berries made them consider eating more of the fruit: “I was reading the benefits of berries on the wall, I didn’t know they are so healthy – so, I think I will try to eat more in the future” (*Participant 3.2*).

#### **6.6.4 Intellectual Dimension**

Finally, the focus groups explored the last brand experience dimension, the intellectual experiences with Berries & Bite Brunch. The participants had mixed responses regarding the intellectual engagement provided by the restaurant. For example, some participants (*Participants 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, and 3.2*) were intellectually stimulated by the variety in the menu,

special ingredients, or educational wall art about berries, as presented in the table below (see Table 14).

**Table 14 – Menu Variety, Ingredients, and Educational Elements: Intellectual Engagement at the Restaurant.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Quote (see Appendix B)
1.4	I really liked for example also the Hollandaise sauce on the eggs Benedict so it made me think about its ingredients and what could be that special added spice.
1.5	I would say that the variety in their menu made me curious about certain dishes, especially the ones with more special ingredients.
Focus group 2	
ID	Quote (see Appendix C)
2.1	I was actually reading the wall art of berries, all the benefits of the fruits, so that made me think a bit.
Focus group 3	
ID	Quote (see Appendix D)
3.2	As I said, I was reading about berries on the wall, so that actually made me think about all the health benefits.
3.5	It actually made me think about how I could recreate the plate. I was thinking about the ingredients, how they fit together, what else could be added to make it even better and more special. So, it evoked a bit of curiosity of me.

A unique perspective was presented in the second focus group by *Participants 2.2* and *2.5*, who actually thought about the restaurant’s business model. *Participant 2.5* considered the difficulty of starting a business in the breakfast and brunch sector, suggesting that the entry may not be as challenging as some assume: “I had a thought that it wouldn’t be that complicated to start a business in this field.” On the other hand, *Participant 2.2* noted the interesting economic dimensions of transforming a simple meal like breakfast into an experience that attracts an upscale market:

I was thinking about how crazy it is that you can make a huge business out of breakfast. From a simple breakfast, you can create something that feels fancy, available for the upper class, when it’s just about eggs and sausages. Yet, it’s presented and executed in a way that makes it high class.

In contrast, others, like *Participants 1.2* and *3.4*, expressed scepticism about a restaurant’s ability to evoke intellectual thoughts. *Participant 1.2* noted, “Honestly, I haven’t thought about it that way before, I mean that a restaurant could influence me intellectually – I enjoyed

the food here, but I wouldn't say it particularly sparked any deep thoughts or curiosity in me." Furthermore, *Participant 3.4* strengthened this opinion by stating, "To be honest, I wouldn't say that any restaurant can really provoke thoughts – maybe creativity in terms of the ingredients and how the food is prepared, but that's it."

Afterwards, participants were asked whether the presentation of food could enhance the intellectual experience in any way. Participants were divided on whether plating contributed to intellectual curiosity. Some recognised the presentation as a source of culinary inspiration, as presented in the table below (see Table 15).

**Table 15 – Plating as a Source of Culinary Inspiration.**

Focus group 1	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix B)</i>
1.1	For instance, it made me think about how can I also slice the avocado this way.
1.3	I think the plating there could definitely give inspiration to guests.
1.5	Or even it actually made me think about how ingredients can be arranged on a plate.
Focus group 2	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix C)</i>
2.2	Yes, for sure it can give inspiration. I even thought, next time when guests are coming over, I could think of similar combination of food.
2.3	I find it interesting how they put together a meal with items I wouldn't think of. For example, on your plate <i>Participant 2.2</i> , I really liked the combination, I wouldn't have thought it would be nice to have hashbrown with avocado, cheddar and stuff like that. And how well they go together.
2.5	Plating at this restaurant might just made me think about food in another way, due to combination of ingredients etc.
Focus group 3	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix D)</i>
3.5	Well, I think as I said before. Regarding the recreation of the plate, it also made me think about the colours that could be used, the arrangement of the plate, the textures etc.

On the contrary, others believed it did not excite any intellectual thoughts. *Participant 1.2* said, "I think their plating style, while beautiful, is more about aesthetics for me – it doesn't particularly drive any intellectual engagement, but it does enhance the overall experience." Moreover, *Participant 2.1* further supported this viewpoint: "To be honest, for me, a plating cannot really evoke any intellectual thoughts."

In addition, interestingly, towards the end of the discussion in the third focus group, the topic of intellectual engagement shifted to a distinct landscape of the culinary world. *Participant 3.4* mentioned that while Berries & Bite Brunch’s food presentation might not fully engage diners on an intellectual level, other dining formats’ plating, like fine dining and molecular gastronomy, could offer deeper intellectual stimulation: “I think, we have to look a bit in different directions, for example fine dining or molecular gastronomy – well, those for sure, can engage you in an intellectual way.”

### 6.7 End-of-Discussion Insights

The focus group discussion ended by examining the overall importance of plating in shaping guests’ experiences and perceptions of a restaurant brand. Across all three focus groups, participants expressed that aesthetic plating has crucial importance in restaurants, especially in the social media age, where people usually share their dining experience. *Participant 1.5* said that “A restaurant can basically get free advertising from a dish that is beautifully plated.” They further noted that a well-presented dish can make a great first impression both in person and online, as presented in the table below (see Table 16).

**Table 16 – The Importance of Plating on First Impressions.**

Focus group 1	
ID	Quote (see Appendix B)
1.1	I have to say that a nice presentation does make a good first impression and I would have more positive feelings towards a brand.
Focus group 2	
ID	Quote (see Appendix C)
2.4	Obviously, plating is crucial when it comes to restaurants. It grabs people’s attention, like ‘Oh my god, that looks so good, I want to visit that place!’. I think the design, looks and overall presentation of a brand can convince people, to choose it. However, its more about first impressions, I think.
Focus group 3	
ID	Quote (see Appendix D)
3.1	I think plating is crucial for new potential guests as a first impression. As I said before, looking up restaurants online, the plates can really capture someone’s attention and could be a deciding factor.

However, everyone agreed that even if a dish is visually beautiful, it is not enough to

disregard other aspects such as the taste of the food, the quality of service, or even the overall ambience of the restaurant, as it can be observed in the table below (see Table 17).

**Table 17 – Highlighting the Significance of a Holistic Experience.**

Focus group 1	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix B)</i>
<i>1.1</i>	Even though I appreciate good plating, it's not the most important thing.
<i>1.2</i>	A good restaurant brand cannot be only about the plating.
<i>1.3</i>	I would say that still my overall opinion about a brand and experience with a brand cannot be changed just because the plating was nice.
<i>1.4</i>	I have to consider other factors as well when choosing a restaurant to visit or re-visit.
<i>1.5</i>	So it's not the only thing, but it does help the brand's image as a whole.
Focus group 2	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix C)</i>
<i>2.2</i>	I've already been to restaurants where the plating was amazing, really aesthetic, but when I ate it, I felt the ingredients were not the best for example, and they only went for the looks. So, in that case, I had a pretty bad experience with the brand. I think as the others said, in restaurants it is one of the important factors to consider, but just a nice plate is not going to make a great brand.
<i>2.4</i>	I think an experience with a brand, and my overall opinion depends on various things. For example, today, I wasn't really satisfied with other things in the restaurant, such as the ambience, the staff, and also the food was not extra special. So, although the plating is nice, I have to look at the bigger picture.
Focus group 3	
<i>ID</i>	<i>Quote (see Appendix D)</i>
<i>3.1</i>	In order to get loyal customers for a brand, you need to give more than just an aesthetic plate.
<i>3.3</i>	I would also say, that to run a good restaurant business, and have a good brand image, much more is needed than aesthetic plating. It is the combination of everything, including also the flavours, interior design, the staff, etc. So, to form an overall opinion of a restaurant brand, I look at various elements.
<i>3.5</i>	I would be loyal to a restaurant brand if they also take good care of their customers, so have a nice staff, delicious food of course, and overall, a good atmosphere.

Hence, participants claimed that to become loyal customers, a holistic brand experience is needed.

Additionally, an interesting viewpoint was brought up by *Participant 2.1*, who noted that the type of restaurant can also influence how important plating is to the overall experience. He expressed:

I would say also the style of the restaurant could define the importance of plating. For instance, in a brunch restaurant I do expect a nice plating, and it's really important for the experience. However, if I go to a traditional old Hungarian restaurant with huge proportions, I would be confused to get a plate like today. So, the plating for me differs from restaurant to restaurant, but I do believe that attention to this factor could make a better picture of the brand in my mind.

This suggests that what works for a brunch place in terms of presentation might not work for a traditional restaurant, meaning the role of plating could also depend on the chosen place.

Finally, regarding the dining experience at Berries & Bite Brunch, participants had mixed views regarding the relationship between plating and the overall brand experience. For instance, *Participants 1.2* and *1.3* indicated that the plating at Berries & Bite Brunch was the most positive aspect of their dining experience, highlighting that while other factors like the atmosphere and staff behaviour were not exceptional, the plating helped to enhance their overall perception of the place: "In my overall experience with the brand, the plating was the most positive and memorable – however, a good restaurant brand cannot be only about the plating" (*Participant 1.2*). Moreover, *Participant 1.2* further stated:

I would even say that this place was basically saved by the appealing presentation of food. I think the taste itself was good but not that special, also the atmosphere, and the staff was not the nicest. So, for me, definitely the plating was a nice point of the experience.

On the other hand, *Participant 3.2* suggested that Berries & Bite Brunch needs to offer something more unique in its plating to add more value to the dining experience. Although the plating was aesthetically pleasing, she argued that good plating has become a standard expectation, and therefore, for the restaurant to stand out, it needs a bit more special touch: "I think most of the brunch restaurants follow the same patterns, and this restaurant didn't give a plus – so to be engaged with all these dimensions of brand experience, I think a bit more is needed."

## **7. Discussion**

In light of the data gathered from the focus groups and the existing academic literature, this section aims to offer a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the results obtained throughout this study. The present dissertation attempted to explore the relationship between food presentation and the various dimensions of brand experience within the restaurant context. Hence, the research sought to gather insights on how the visual presentation of dishes might enhance or alter the overall experience at restaurants.

The discussion part is divided into two sub-chapters. The first one captures findings that might not directly correspond to the research questions, but still hold undeniable significance and contribute to the overall understanding of the topic. These findings address various subjects: contemporary dining habits, main factors that influence restaurant choices, general perceptions and routines associated with brunch, general attitudes towards aesthetic food presentation, and the overall brand experience at Berries & Bite Brunch, not specifically focusing on the plating. These insights are connected with the literature reviewed in this dissertation, offering a compelling comparison between existing studies and the focus groups' results.

Afterwards, the next part focuses specifically on the research questions of the present dissertation, delving into the relationship between the presentation of food in restaurants and the brand experience it provides.

### **7.1 Contextual Insights**

Firstly, the focus group findings revealed two distinct categories of eating out preferences, with some participants viewing it as a regular, everyday activity and others saving it for more special occasions. Various participants indicated that they eat out almost daily, supporting Walker's (2017) observation that meals consumed away from home have significantly increased over time. Across the focus groups, those who frequently dine out largely do so as part of their social life, work routines, or simply their lifestyle, validating the observation that today's dining establishments serve purposes beyond just eating (Astuti & Hanan, 2016; Fieldhouse, 1996).

Nonetheless, the small subgroup of participants who indicated that they only dine out on special occasions with people who are close to them highlights the symbolic power of food.

Their selective dining habits emphasise the role of food as an ideal mean for individuals to demonstrate their sense of belonging, aligning with the notion that it serves as a universally understood expression of hospitality and companionship (Fieldhouse, 1996). Moreover, their experiences further confirm literature's focus on 'commensality' and the fundamental feeling of community and belonging that eating embodies (Fieldhouse, 1996; Koponen & Mustonen, 2020; Pilcher, 2012).

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that there were participants who found restaurants suitable for multiple types of purposes, be it casual meetups with friends, weekday work lunches, or more special events. This highlights the various roles restaurants can play in individuals' contemporary lives. Therefore, the results clearly align with existing studies indicating that food consumption has evolved into a multifaceted social and individual experience (Crowther, 2018; Pilcher, 2012).

Furthermore, during the focus group discussions, participants highlighted several key factors that influence their restaurant choices. The decision-making process for choosing a restaurant among the participants is multifaceted and influenced by a mix of practical and experiential factors. Google Maps and online reviews serve as digital reference points, while other aspects like ambience, food variety, and price continue to hold traditional importance.

One of the most mentioned points across all groups was the importance of variety in a restaurant's menu. Participants prefer having multiple choices, reflecting their varied tastes and preferences. In addition, as seen in Table 4, the frequent mention of up-to-date online menus indicates how essential it is for restaurants to maintain an active digital presence. This phenomenon was also mentioned in existing literature, stating that diners increasingly rely on online resources. In fact, as mentioned previously, before making a reservation or visiting a restaurant, 84% of diners examine the menu online (National Restaurant Association, 2019). This emphasises the need for restaurants to not only offer an array of choices but to make them readily accessible and current online.

The atmosphere of a restaurant was also a vital factor for participants. Hence, dining out is not solely about the food; it is about the entire experience. Nevertheless, it is interesting how this ambience is perceived before even stepping into the restaurant. This once again indicated the prevalence of technology in the restaurant sector. Based on the results, modern diners

form initial impressions based on online images of restaurants' interiors, décor, and even dishes. This could suggest that what diners see online heavily influences their decision whether to visit a restaurant or not.

Related to the factors mentioned above, participants indicated that platforms like Google Maps have become instrumental in decision-making, as visible in Table 5. Thus, these applications have expanded their functionality beyond just navigation and now offer comprehensive evaluations and insights about restaurants. Participants actively consult these platforms, valuing peer reviews, both positive and negative. It also became clear that a series of bad reviews can easily deter potential customers, emphasising the importance of restaurants to constantly attempt to provide outstanding customer experiences.

Therefore, the focus group results align with the trend highlighted in the literature, where customers increasingly expect and demand greater technological integration from restaurants, with the industry predicted to be fully digital by 2030 (National Restaurant Association, 2019). Nevertheless, even with the rise of digital platforms, personal suggestions still hold a lot of weight, according to multiple participants. Thus, recommendations from trusted individuals, like family and friends, remain valuable in the dining industry.

Finally, the aspect of price also emerged as a consideration. The pragmatic approach of setting a budget and then exploring dining options reveals a financially conscious consumer base. However, participants are not only looking for affordable options; they also seek value for their expenditure, ensuring quality is not sacrificed for cost.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that while recent studies emphasise sustainability and health consciousness as key trends (Euler, 2022; Georgiev, n.d.; Owner, n.d.; Voicu, 2023), these themes were surprisingly absent from the focus group discussions. In other words, the sample was not concerned with aspects such as the healthiness of meals, environmental friendliness, or social responsibility. This hints at a potential gap between recognised industry trends and the actual preferences of the participants in the present research.

The following part of the discussions revealed participants' practices and perceptions regarding brunch, providing even more insights about their eating out habits. The

participants universally admired brunch for its food selection and the holistic experience it offers. These sentiments, especially the association of brunch with vacation, pleasure, and leisure (see Table 6), confirm the observations in literature, which state that brunch has transitioned into a symbol of comfort and convenience (Ternikar, 2014). Moreover, Ternikar's (2014) characterization of brunch as a postmodern symbol of gastronomic luxury and comfort food is further reaffirmed by participants' enjoyment derived from brunch menus and their descriptions of it as both luxurious and comforting.

Participants also touched upon the digital appeal of brunch, viewing it as a perfect 'Instagrammable' occasion. This sentiment finds strong support in the literature, with sources like Hartley (2021) and the Future Food Strategy Group (2018) emphasising the photogenic nature of brunch meals in the era of social media.

Nevertheless, while brunch restaurants resonate positively with the participants in terms of food and experience, there were clear concerns expressed across the focus groups in terms of logistics and pricing. As a matter of fact, a significant point of difference from the literature was the participants' feedback on brunch pricing. Many expressed the sentiment that brunch meals, especially in Budapest, were overpriced. This contrasts with the Future Food Strategy Group's (2018) claim that brunch places typically have casual pricing, implying affordability and accessibility.

Afterwards, the focus group discussions revealed participants' viewpoints on the significance of aesthetic food plating in restaurants. Aesthetic food plating emerged consistently across the focus groups as a crucial enhancer of the dining experience. As visible in Table 7, for these individuals, a well-constructed plate was an indicator of a restaurant's attention to detail and precision, as well as the quality of both the dish and the establishment. This perspective aligns with existing literature, which underlines the crucial role of food's visual presentation in the contemporary restaurant landscape. According to Cifci et al. (2021) and Michel et al. (2014), the art of plating is more than just decoration; it is critical in enhancing overall meal satisfaction, playing a critical part in the dining experience, and influencing food choices.

Moreover, it was interesting to see how the visual appearance of food influenced participants' decisions in choosing both restaurants and dishes. Participants frequently base their initial impressions of a restaurant on the visual appeal of its dishes. Additionally, within

a restaurant, a beautifully plated dish on a neighbouring table could also captivate participants, encouraging them to order the same. This is consistent with research highlighting the vital role of visual cues when it comes to food. According to Spence et al. (2014), vision significantly impacts eating habits, with the visual system serving as the primary guide in food selection. The results further support the fact that the brain, within moments, determines the appeal and nutritional worth of foods based on visuals (Campo et al., 2017; Spence, 2017).

Nonetheless, it is crucial to mention that participants once again use technology in order to examine the visual appeal of dishes. Therefore, in today's digital age, where visuals matter greatly, a well-presented dish can not only attract diners, but also serve as a marketing tool for potential guests. This was also reinforced by the connection between aesthetic plating and social media, as participants – particularly those involved in content creation – emphasised the importance of food presentation in their online sharing habits. In fact, these findings align with literature indicating an increased trend of sharing food experiences online, with a significant part of Instagram content being food-related (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Spence et al., 2022). Therefore, based on the findings, the significance of considering a meal's aesthetic appeal is highlighted by the role online photos have in influencing eating choices. However, according to Gambetti & Han (2022), restaurants today are actually aware of this phenomenon and focus more on visuals in their strategies, profiting from the appeal of online food images.

Yet, while aesthetics played a significant role in initial impressions and dining choices, it was not the sole determinant of repeat visits or recommendations. The overall dining experience – including taste, food quality, service, and ambience – still held dominance among participants. This suggests that while aesthetic plating can be an inviting factor, it is the comprehensive dining experience that ensures customer loyalty.

Moreover, for some participants, when it came to more authentic Hungarian restaurants or restaurants they had prior positive experiences with, taste could overshadow the need for aesthetic plating. This perspective is a reminder that aesthetic preferences, while important, can sometimes be secondary to flavour.

Additionally, one of the participants voiced an interesting concern, stating that the aesthetic presentation in fine dining settings could be too extreme and that it overshadows practical aspects like the quantity and essence of a dish. Even though one participant is a small fragment of the sample, it is worth correlating this opinion with Paakki et al.'s (2019) research, in which they highlight that while aesthetics can be about beauty and art, it should also serve a practical purpose. Thus, both the literature and participant insights stress the importance of ensuring that a dish's visual appeal does not compromise other qualities.

Furthermore, drawing on the feedback from the dining experience at Berries & Bite Brunch and contrasting it with current literature gives an interesting viewpoint on the restaurant's branding strategy and possible areas for improvement. Firstly, a significant proportion of participants across all three focus groups expressed criticism towards Berries & Bite Brunch's minimalist interior, as seen in Table 9. There was a noticeable desire for a more 'cosy' or 'rustic' ambience, and overall, individuals missed the warmth of the place. Participants also shared the perception that the restaurant was trying too hard to appeal to younger diners, which suggests that the restaurant's design feels inauthentic and forced. Such uniformity in feedback indicates a significant impact on the overall dining experience, as the ambience plays a pivotal role in establishing a diner's initial impressions. Thus, the minimalistic interior design of Berries & Bite Brunch, while trendy, may not effectively differentiate and emphasise distinctive attributes of the restaurant, which is crucial in today's competitive landscape, according to Dabeva (2012). In this case, Berries & Bite Brunch may benefit from reviewing their interior design to better align with their intended brand identity and audience.

Moreover, the feedback was predominantly positive about the food's taste and quality. However, it is crucial to note the underlying sentiment that while the food was perceived as good, it was not necessarily considered unique or outstanding. This suggests that while the food met basic expectations, it did not elevate the brand experience to a distinctly memorable level. As a matter of fact, this viewpoint aligns with McCracken's (2022) perspective that success in the restaurant industry entails more than merely serving delicious food. Establishing a unique culinary identity that resonates with the target audience and stands out in a crowded market is crucial. Thus, on a personal note, while Berries & Bite Brunch may

have achieved quality, the challenge lies more in creating uniqueness in their culinary offerings.

Regarding the plating at Berries & Bite Brunch, all participants were in harmony regarding the visual appeal of the food plating, valuing the colours as well as the colour contrasts, the precise arrangement of ingredients, and the plateware itself in particular. Their feedback resonates with the established guidelines in the literature on effective plating. Campo et al. (2017) identify colour as a pivotal element in food presentation. Furthermore, the dual considerations of plate and food colour, as highlighted by Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman (2014), were expertly managed at Berries & Bite Brunch, particularly given the influence of colour contrast on perceived food presentation. Their choice of plateware is also consistent with the preference for white and creamy-coloured plates commonly used by culinary experts to elevate their dishes (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2014). Additionally, the structured and neat presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch aligns with the findings of Michel et al. (2014) and Spence et al. (2022), which underscore that an organised plate presentation can enhance diners' meal perceptions and overall enjoyment. Nevertheless, as presented in Table 10, there was also a sentiment expressed throughout the focus groups that the presentation style was not that unique, drawing parallels with numerous other brunch establishments. This could possibly imply that while Berries & Bite Brunch excelled in aesthetic plating, they did not necessarily establish a distinctive brand identity through their plating techniques.

Finally, although the 'Berries' theme of the restaurant was recognized and appreciated, participants felt it could have been more consistently and innovatively integrated, especially in the plating. As visible in Table 11, participants suggested incorporating berries or even just the colour palette in each dish to potentially lead to a stronger, and more consistent brand identity. According to Dabeva (2012), it is critical to ensure that all branding elements are harmonised and synchronised to express the business's underlying concept. Thus, while Berries & Bite Brunch already has a theme in place, improving its expression and ensuring its integration across all touchpoints, might resonate better with customers.

In terms of the brand experience at Berries & Bite Brunch, with a focus beyond the plating, the following findings emerged. Regarding the sensory dimension of brand experiences, elements like the interior design and colour schemes contributed to creating a visually

pleasant atmosphere, although some participants lacked a bit more warmth of the place and also found certain visual elements like motifs and arts on the walls a bit overwhelming. Such feedback is a clear indication of the importance of visual cohesion in a restaurant setting, where diners seek a feeling of coziness, clarity, and an engaging environment. In addition, there was a suggestion to further enhance the visual experience by having the staff wear uniforms that align with the restaurant's berry theme. This again highlights the need to integrate into all brand elements the creative concept of a business.

Moreover, the auditory experience in the restaurant was mixed among participants. Based on the varied auditory feedback, it is obvious that achieving an ideal balance of background noise in a dining environment is crucial. While some diners appreciate a livelier atmosphere, others seek a quieter setting for undisturbed conversation. Moreover, even smaller elements, such as background music, if not finely chosen, can go unnoticed. This highlights the significance of adjusting the auditory environment to cater to a diverse clientele, ensuring a pleasant dining experience for all. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the loud conversations of other people are quite out of the control of restaurants, especially when the restaurant is full.

The olfactory dimension appeared to be a missed opportunity for Berries & Bite Brunch. Many participants thought the restaurant might have improved the dining experience by utilising appealing smells like freshly baked products or coffee. This suggests that smell holds a unique place in dining experiences, and scents can provide an initial impression of the actual meal, setting expectations and evoking anticipation. However, the fact that the sense of smell was not engaged could be attributed to the types of dishes served or the preparation methods used in restaurants.

Regarding the sense of touch, most participants found it negligible in shaping their overall experience. Furthermore, as for the taste experience, it was primarily related to the plate of the restaurant; hence, it will be discussed in the next section when addressing the research questions.

Given the findings, the affective dimension of the brand experience at Berries & Bite Brunch seems to be characterised by a mixture of positive emotions and missed opportunities to foster a deeper emotional connection. A general feeling of pleasantness emerged as a

recurring theme among participants. They claimed that being in the restaurant with good food and pleasant company created a soothing atmosphere that most diners appreciated. Moreover, the sense of excitement associated with the meal selection, the anticipation of the food's arrival, and the final presentation of the dish indicated the restaurant's success in creating moments of heightened emotion.

However, while these positive feelings were present in participants' experiences, they were not deep enough to foster a strong emotional bond with the Berries & Bite Brunch brand. The lack of a profound emotional connection indicates that while the initial experience was generally pleasant, it might not lead to long-term brand loyalty or advocacy.

Furthermore, the role of staff in influencing affective experiences cannot be understated. Based on the results, there is a significant impact that restaurant staff can have on the overall dining experience. In this instance, the neutral or perceived grumpiness of the waiter introduced a negative element, reducing the overall positive emotions felt by the participants. Such instances emphasise the importance of consistent staff training and maintaining a friendly atmosphere, as they can play a crucial role in determining the overall emotional narrative of diners' experiences. This observation is also consistent with academic literature. Mosley (2007) highlighted that due to the intricate nature of the service sector, brand experiences are harder to manage. In fact, he highlights challenges regarding the interpersonal complexity of such businesses that emphasise the connection and understanding between staff and customers. Similarly, Khan and Fatma (2017) claim in their study that alongside factors like food quality, the appropriate behaviour and presentation of staff are crucial in shaping the brand experience. This further solidifies the importance of the staff's role, as prevalent also in the present findings.

Regarding the behavioural dimension of brand experience, based on the collected data, participants' behaviours at Berries & Bite Brunch ranged from engaging with the brand in some forms to instances where they felt more distant and passive. One of the behaviours that was noted by participants was the fact that they would share the experience in the restaurant with their family members and friends, but would not write an online review. An explanation for this was actually provided by a participant who expressed that a restaurant experience needs to be exceptionally good or notably poor to post online reviews. Thus, this might imply

that while Berries & Bite Brunch met expectations, there might be room for enhancements to encourage guests to leave a positive review.

Moreover, the restaurant's wall art provided more than just visual appeal for diners. Some participants appeared to be persuaded by the emphasised benefits of berries, motivating them to include more of the fruit in their diets. In fact, this aligns with the findings in literature related to behavioural brand experiences, which state that interaction with a brand can encourage certain physical acts, behaviours, and even modifications to one's lifestyle (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Pina & Dias, 2021). Such experiences also encompass integrating enhancements to personal lifestyles (Hwang et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the feedback was not all positive. Some participants felt their interaction with the Berries & Bite Brunch brand was limited to the dining experience, hinting at a missed opportunity for deeper brand engagement.

Intellectual experiences at Berries & Bite Brunch, as suggested from the feedback during the focus groups, seem to encompass varied responses. On the one hand, certain participants thought the restaurant evoked intellectual curiosity. Notably, as presented in Table 14, aspects such as the menu's diversity, inclusion of unique ingredients, and informative wall art enhanced intellectual engagement among participants.

Another interesting perspective arose when some participants discussed the business approach of Berries & Bite Brunch and overall brunch restaurants. They considered how these places turn a simple meal, like breakfast, into a high-end experience for a wealthier audience. This suggests that the participants were thinking beyond just the food, possibly influenced by the restaurant's brand. This viewpoint could again be explained by existing literature, which claims that brunch has actually become a postmodern symbol of gastronomic luxury and comfort food today (Ternikar, 2014).

However, on the other hand, some participants were sceptical about the degree of intellectual stimulation that a restaurant environment, such as Berries & Bite Brunch, can truly provide. For them, while there might be an appreciation of culinary creativity, it does not necessarily translate into broader cognitive or analytical reflections. This highlights that while

restaurants might invest in fostering an intellectual ambience, it may not resonate with everyone. What stimulates intellectual curiosity in one diner may not evoke the same response in another.

## **7.2 Addressing the Research Questions**

It is crucial to highlight again that this study was conducted in an exploratory manner, guided by research questions rather than predefined hypotheses. This approach was chosen due to the significant gap in existing literature concerning the relationship between food presentation and brand experience in restaurants. Thus, the subsequent section will address the posed research questions of the present dissertation in detail in order to offer foundational insights into this area.

***RQ1A:** How does food presentation in restaurants influence the sensory brand experience of diners?*

In the context of the chosen restaurant, Berries & Bite Brunch, plating played a significant role in shaping the sensory brand experience of diners, which refers to the interactions focused on customers' visual, auditory, smell, taste, and touch perceptions (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Moreira et al., 2017; Pina & Dias, 2021; Shamim & Butt, 2013). Notably, these experiences are activated by brand exposure, with food presentation acting as a potential brand touchpoint in the case of Berries & Bite Brunch (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019).

The visual dimension turned out to be the most dominant in diners' sensory experience at Berries & Bite Brunch. This aligns with literature highlighting that visual elements, including designs and colours, are key in sensory experiences, as they offer an easily memorable and aesthetic feel of the brand (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020). In this case, most participants appreciated the colour contrasts and the arrangement of food on the plates, which directly contributed to the visual experience at the restaurant.

Tasting, which is considered to be a direct experience according to Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019), was also connected to the plating at Berries & Bite Brunch. A couple of

participants emphasised that the presentation of the food positively influenced their appetite, indicating a direct correlation between plating and the taste experience. Some even expressed that the visual appeal of the food immediately enhanced their appetite, suggesting a connection between visual aesthetics and taste perceptions.

As for hearing, an interesting observation was the slight influence of plating on the auditory experience. For instance, some participants noted that the crunchy textures in their dishes, which could be attributed to the plating, contributed to an enhanced auditory dimension. However, it should be mentioned that this was not a universally shared opinion. Although just a few participants remarked on the auditory enhancement from plating, its broader significance is confirmed by literature, which highlights the role of sounds in enhancing the dining experience (Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014; Zampini & Spence, 2004). In fact, contemporary culinary recommendations encourage the use of diverse textures in plating, highlighting the sensory appeal of them (CookinGenie, 2023). Such balance in textures is crucial for chefs aiming to deliver a rich and harmonised meal experience (Cifci et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in the context of Berries & Bite Brunch restaurant, the findings suggested a negligible correlation between food plating and the sensory experiences of smell and touch. This aligns with literature that claims that the importance of certain senses, specifically tasting, smelling, hearing, and touching, can differ depending on the type of product or service offered (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). The general underestimation of the sense of smell in food experience is also noted in existing studies, as many people often mistakenly associate many smell sensations with taste (Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence, 2015). Hence, it is possible that participants in this study may have also overlooked this aspect, consistent with such literature observations. Additionally, the type of dishes predominant at Berries & Bite Brunch, which tend to be more like toasts and such, may not inherently emit strong aromas, further explaining the overlooked role of smell in this particular dining context. Moreover, the sense of touch could actually be an area of exploration for the restaurant, as textures and temperatures could introduce an added layer of engagement, according to literature (Kravchyk, 2022; Schifferstein et al., 2020; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). However, it is worth noting that textures were in fact mentioned by participants, but they rather connected them to the auditory experience.

Thus, in the context of Berries & Bite Brunch, plating strongly influenced diners' visual and taste perceptions. There was also an intriguing link between plating textures and auditory experiences. Yet, the connections between plating and the senses of smell and touch were not mentioned by participants.

***RQ1B:** How does food presentation in restaurants influence the affective brand experience of diners?*

In the settings of Berries & Bite Brunch, while plating played a role in shaping the affective brand experience – encompassing a variety of feelings, emotions, and moods evoked during interactions with businesses and signifying the emotional bond between consumer and brand (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Pina & Dias, 2021; Shamim & Butt, 2013) – participants pointed out that it was not the only factor determining it. As presented in Table 12, several participants viewed Berries & Bite Brunch's aesthetic plating as a direct reflection of the restaurant's precision and dedication to quality. This perception of the restaurant's commitment to detail, as seen by the plating, generated a sense of trust and enhanced more positive sentiments towards the brand. Moreover, as mentioned previously, when the dishes arrived at the tables, participants also mentioned the feeling of excitement evoked by the overall picture of the dish.

However, while the aesthetic appeal of the plates evoked pleasant and excited sentiments, the food presentation was not unique enough to build a strong emotional bond with the Berries & Bite Brunch brand. As noted by the participants, the plating style seemed to be quite common and could be found in several other brunch places. Thus, as the presentation was not viewed as being specific to Berries & Bite Brunch, it was difficult to develop a significant emotional connection with the brand based on the plating technique. This observation also aligns with Dabeva's (2012) viewpoint, which highlights that differentiation is vital in today's competitive environment. Without a unique and distinctive identity, restaurants might struggle to connect emotionally with customers, since it is essential to create lasting impressions and stand out from competitors (Bistrohub, 2020; Kakadiya, 2023; McCracken, 2022; Robitaille, 2023).

Furthermore, participants highlighted the necessity of considering the overall dining experience. Many individuals emphasised that plating in any restaurant cannot entirely impact their emotional connection to a brand or their affective brand experience. Instead, it is a combination of several factors, ranging from the flavour of the food and the environment of the restaurant to interactions with the employees. This viewpoint emphasises the multifaceted character of eating experiences, which is also confirmed by existing literature. For instance, Ivkov et al. (2016) and Merckaert (2023b) emphasised the significance of multiple factors influencing the dining experience.

Hence, while plating at Berries & Bite Brunch did influence the affective brand experience by fostering positive sentiments, its impact was somewhat decreased by the perception of its lack of uniqueness. Furthermore, the overall emotional relationship with the brand was rather shaped by the overall dining experience, which included various other factors besides eating.

***RQ1C:** How does food presentation in restaurants influence the behavioural brand experience of diners?*

Based on the findings at Berries & Bite Brunch, the behavioural brand experience of participants – which refers to certain behaviours, physical acts, or even lifestyle changes after interacting with the brand (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Beig & Nika, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021; Pina & Dias, 2021) – was in fact influenced by the plating of the restaurant. The primary behaviour stimulated by the food presentation was photographing the meals and subsequently sharing these images on social media platforms, especially on Instagram. This behaviour was directly attributed to the visual appeal of the plated dishes, as noted by numerous participants. As mentioned previously, this finding further strengthens literature, which highlights that technology has increased the visibility of food images online and has made people more enthusiastic about sharing their meals on social media (Spence et al., 2016). In fact, the trend of taking pictures and sharing them when eating out is so common nowadays that phrases like ‘camera eats first’ have been coined to describe this shift in dining habits (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Wachyuni & Yusuf, 2021; Yong et al., 2020).

However, beyond taking pictures and digital sharing, the presentation of the food also inspired diners on a more interactive level. As presented in Table 13, several participants were motivated to replicate the dishes in their home environments, which indicates how

powerful visually appealing plating can be. It not only makes diners take pictures and share them online, but also inspires them to try cooking the meals in their own kitchen, hoping to recreate the experience at the restaurant.

Moreover, another interesting behavioural outcome of the plating technique was observed with one participant who even tried a dish he usually would not because it looked appealing. Thus, the influence of visuals is obvious, as a diner even stepped beyond his comfort zone because he was encouraged by the dish's aesthetic presentation. This experience further reinforces the notion that the presentation of a meal not only acts as an aesthetic attraction but may also greatly impact customers' preferences and possibly affect purchasing decisions (Campo et al., 2017). Furthermore, prior studies have shown that the visual system often takes the lead in shaping meal choices, emphasising the ongoing relevance of plating and presentation in the eating experience (Campo et al., 2017; Spence, 2017).

Therefore, plating can undoubtedly make diners take pictures, share their meals online, inspire them to cook, and even encourage them to try new dishes. The way food is presented can indeed shape how individuals might behave and what they choose to eat.

***RQ1D:** How does food presentation in restaurants influence the intellectual brand experience of diners?*

The relationship between food presentation and intellectual brand experiences – which refer to the stimulation of creative and analytical thinking, as well as curiosity through brand interactions (Beig & Nika, 2019; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Hwang et al., 2021) – varied among participants in the context of Berries & Bite Brunch. The results from the focus groups revealed diverse opinions on whether the presentation of food could amplify intellectual curiosity. For instance, as visible in Table 15, some participants perceived the plating as a tool for culinary creativity and exploration. They highlighted how the presentation made them wonder about the unusual pairings of ingredients and how such combinations could be reproduced or improved in their own culinary activities. In fact, the reflections can be contextualised within the frameworks of analytical and creative thinking. Comments highlighting the distinctive ingredient combinations in dishes indicated analytical thinking, emphasising precision and logic in how these dishes were created and plated (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). Simultaneously, participants' curiosity about

replicating or enhancing these dishes exhibits creative thinking, characterised by spontaneity and originality in planning (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019).

On the contrary, other participants felt that while the presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch was visually appealing, it served primarily an aesthetic purpose and did not necessarily evoke any deeper intellectual engagement. As shared by participants, the beauty of the plate just added to the overall dining experience, but its influence was more sensory than intellectual.

However, a participant brought up an interesting point near the end of the focus group. He expressed that although Berries & Bite Brunch's plating might not achieve significant intellectual engagement, other dining formats' meal presentations, particularly fine dining and molecular gastronomy, could have the potential for profound intellectual stimulation. This perspective could actually be connected to existing literature, which highlights the transformative impact of molecular gastronomy in the fine dining environment. The combination of physical sciences with culinary artistry has allowed chefs to explore and express themselves in innovative ways, pushing the boundaries of conventional cooking (Cifci et al., 2021; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). This distinction suggests that while plating can evoke curiosity and thoughts to some degree, the depth of intellectual engagement might also be linked to the dining format, type of restaurant, and the evolving culinary techniques employed.

Therefore, while plating at Berries & Bite Brunch resonated with some diners on an intellectual level, mainly through inspiration and culinary creativity, others viewed it merely as an aesthetic element. The intellectual engagement derived from plating, as revealed in this study, seems to be dependent on individual perspectives and perhaps on the broader dining context.

***RQ1: How does food presentation in restaurants influence the overall brand experience of diners?***

Finally, after delving into the distinct dimensions of brand experience, it is important to extend these findings to a wider context and determine the impact of plating on diners' overall brand experience. Based on the focus group discussions, it was evident that the

presentation of food plays a big role in how guests view a restaurant brand, especially in today's world where sharing dining experiences on social media is a common practice (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Wachyuni & Yusuf, 2021; Yong et al., 2020). As a matter of fact, participants pointed out the marketing power of a well-plated dish, suggesting that it can be a form of free advertising for a restaurant. As presented in Table 16, this emphasises the powerful first impression a well-presented dish can make both in person and online, since visuals are key determinants when it comes to food selection (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Spence et al., 2014).

However, all participants agreed that a good-looking dish is not enough. While a visually appealing presentation can capture attention, the taste, quality of service, and ambience of the restaurant also play significant roles in shaping the dining experience. Therefore, as visible in Table 17, many elements come into play when forming an opinion about a restaurant's brand. This perspective further aligns with the broader understanding of contemporary dining experiences, which extends beyond just food consumption (Astuti & Hanan, 2016; Fieldhouse, 1996). In fact, particularly after the pandemic, customers do want to receive a holistic experience offered by dining in a restaurant, which includes various factors (Merckaert, 2023b; TheFork, 2022; TouchBistro, 2023). In addition, Dabeva (2012) and Smith (2017) further argued that a holistic brand strategy for a restaurant should address every touchpoint in a guest's journey, from booking to departure.

Furthermore, an interesting point was raised, which expressed that the type or theme of a restaurant also plays a role in identifying the importance of plating. In the contemporary restaurant industry, given its extensive landscape, there are several distinct types and categories of restaurants that might set businesses apart from each other (Davis et al., 2018; SkyQuest Technology Consulting Pvt. Ltd., 2022). Moreover, literature further highlights the importance of considering the target audience. Chefs should consider their diners' preferences and expectations when creating their plates. By doing so, they can better appeal to their audience and enhance the dining experience (Cifci et al., 2021; Rudakova, 2023; The Culinary Pro, n.d.). Thus, this could indicate that effective plating strategies may vary based on the restaurant's style, as well as the target audience.

When considering the restaurant Berries & Bite Brunch, the feedback regarding the influence of food plating on the overall brand experience varied among participants. For some, the plating was a notable element of the experience, and they even suggested that it was the highlight of the visit at the restaurant. Nonetheless, the perspective that good plating has become a standard expectation highlights the need for restaurants, including Berries & Bite Brunch, to continuously innovate and offer a more unique touch to their food presentation to truly distinguish themselves in a competitive market.

Therefore, while plating undeniably plays a significant role in shaping diners' perceptions, the overall brand experience of a restaurant is influenced by a multifaceted interplay of elements, and it cannot be narrowed down to just one factor.

## 8. Conclusion

The primary aim of the present dissertation was to examine the relationship between food presentation, especially in the context of brunch restaurants, and its influence on the multidimensional concept of brand experience. Considering the existing literature and the results that have been presented, food presentation has undeniably gained significance in modern society, reinforcing the famous expression that ‘we eat first with our eyes’.

The focus group discussions emphasised the role that aesthetic food plating plays in enhancing the overall dining experience in a restaurant. A thoughtfully presented dish not only acts as a mere decoration, but it is also evidence of a restaurant’s precision, quality, and dedication to excellence, according to the results. Moreover, the findings further demonstrated that the visual appeal of dishes has a major influence on customers’ first impressions, as well as restaurant and dish selections. These sentiments are consistent with previous research, which suggests that visual presentation is crucial to overall meal satisfaction and can influence individuals’ food choices (Cifci et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2014).

The reliance on technology of contemporary diners, particularly in the era of social media, is also notable, as individuals frequently use online platforms to evaluate the visual appeal of a dish. This digital evaluation has dual implications: on the one hand, an aesthetically appealing dish can attract potential customers; on the other hand, aesthetic dishes can even serve as a free marketing tool in the digital realm through user-generated content, as people increasingly share their dining experiences online (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Spence et al., 2016). Hence, contemporary restaurants are challenged to meet the visual expectations of diners, as ensuring a meal’s aesthetic appeal goes beyond in-house satisfaction and crucially influences their online brand image. In addition, as stated by participants, platforms like Google Maps are also crucial in dining decisions, further supporting the growing role of digital tools in meal aesthetics and broader dining choices.

Furthermore, by addressing the research questions, it became evident that plating indeed influences the various dimensions of brand experience, although the extent of its effect varied among them. Considering RQ1A (*How does food presentation in restaurants*

*influence the sensory brand experience of diners?*), based on the context of Berries & Bite Brunch, food presentation does influence the sensory brand experiences of diners, primarily affecting the visual and taste perceptions. While some diners also related plating to auditory experiences, the influence on smell and touch was found to be negligible. However, other factors like interior design, décor, background sounds, and smells can also contribute to sensory experiences. Hence, restaurants should prioritise appealing plating, incorporate thematic design elements, balance ambient sounds, and introduce pleasant aromas to enhance a sensory rich dining atmosphere.

Regarding affective brand experiences and addressing RQ1B (*How does food presentation in restaurants influence the affective brand experience of diners?*), while food presentation does elicit positive emotions towards the brand, its impact on the affective brand experience decreased due to its resemblance to other brunch places. The findings also suggest that factors such as staff behaviour and the overall atmosphere played a more crucial role in influencing emotions, overshadowing the effect of plating. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy focusing on staff interactions and a unique ambience is crucial for developing deeper emotional connections and fostering brand loyalty.

Regarding RQ1C (*How does food presentation in restaurants influence the behavioural brand experience of diners?*), in the context of the given restaurant setting, plating notably influenced diners' behavioural brand experiences, encouraging photographing, online sharing, and culinary exploration. While food presentation played a significant role, other factors, like the décor and wall art, also impacted diners' behaviour. These findings suggest that restaurants should prioritise both food presentation and overall décor and ambience to enhance brand engagement.

Regarding RQ1D (*How does food presentation in restaurants influence the intellectual brand experience of diners?*), at Berries & Bite Brunch, the influence of food presentation on intellectual brand experiences varied among diners, for some, serving as a source of inspiration, sparking creativity and analytical thinking about culinary combinations, while for others, remaining merely an aesthetic appeal. Although other elements like diverse menus, unique ingredients, and informative wall art played a role in intellectual engagement, the results still suggest that the restaurant might have limitations in delivering deep

intellectual engagement across guests. This indicates for restaurants that while efforts to create an intellectually stimulating atmosphere are positive, they might not connect universally with all diners.

Nevertheless, in light of the findings, it is evident that while plating is a significant factor in capturing diners' attention and giving a first impression, it is merely one element in the overarching brand experience of a restaurant. As voiced by participants, they need to look at the bigger picture in order to properly form an opinion of a brand. Hence, modern diners seek a holistic brand experience that goes beyond the visual appeal of a dish; they also consider the taste of the food, the ambience of the restaurant, the quality of service, and the entire journey from the moment they enter until their departure. Thus, for restaurants striving to establish a memorable brand experience, a holistic strategy addressing every potential touchpoint is essential.

Furthermore, the type, theme, and target audience of a restaurant play a crucial role in determining the importance of plating. Different restaurants, given their unique offerings and clienteles, might require varying plating strategies. For instance, participants noted that brunch places have a distinct digital appeal, often being viewed as ideal for 'Instagrammable' moments.

Additionally, for establishments like Berries & Bite Brunch, while plating can be a distinct element of the experience for some visitors, others see it as merely meeting a basic expectation. This sentiment underscores the evolving standards of the contemporary dining landscape. Hence, with good plating increasingly becoming a standard expectation in the industry, restaurants must innovate and provide uniqueness in their food presentation to truly stand out in a competitive market.

In conclusion, in today's contemporary restaurant landscape – where the dining experience extends far beyond just food consumption – plating, as demonstrated by the findings, plays an essential role in enhancing various dimensions of the brand experience. Aesthetic plating has also become a common standard in the digital age; hence, restaurants that provide unique plating techniques can make more lasting impressions. Moreover, different restaurants, given their offerings and target audiences, necessitate varied plating strategies to meet expectations. However, while plating can capture attention and set an initial tone, it is just

one element that forms a restaurant's overall brand experience. Thus, the brand experience of a restaurant is a multifaceted interplay of various elements, and it would be an oversimplification to narrow it down to just one factor.

## **8.1 Limitations and Future Research**

Regarding the limitations of the present dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the scope and boundaries of this study. Being qualitative in nature, the research relied on a small group of participants. While this provided in-depth insights, the limited sample size may not give a comprehensive picture of the broader population's views. Thus, conducting additional focus groups would be beneficial for capturing a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, despite the diversity in participants' professional fields, most of them shared similar socio-educational backgrounds, had completed higher education, and live in the capital city, Budapest. This similarity might have influenced the uniformity of their perspectives. Moreover, the study's focus on a single restaurant also presents a limitation, as examining multiple restaurants or different types might yield varied findings. Lastly, although the original intent was to use MAXQDA software for analysis, manual analysis seemed more convenient, primarily due to the structured nature of the focus groups and essential considerations of time management.

As for directions for future research, this exploratory study serves as an initial step into the relationship between plating in restaurants and brand management. Firstly, a logical extension would be to employ a quantitative approach, using tools like surveys to obtain a more comprehensive view of diner expectations. Furthermore, examining different types of restaurants, including settings like fine dining, could further expand the understanding of the topic. Cultural nuances could be another direction for research, examining how food presentation and plating are perceived across diverse cultures. Lastly, while the present research delved into the impact of plating on brand experience, there is potential to explore other brand constructs, such as brand awareness and loyalty, in the context of food presentation.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Focus Group Interview Script**

#### ***Introduction:***

- Introduction about the topic of the research
- Informing the participants that the session is recorded
- Guidelines for focus groups
- Please introduce yourself briefly (name, age, occupation)

#### ***Warm-up questions:***

- How often do you eat out? Is it for a special occasion or a regular part of your everyday life?
- How often do you have brunch? Do you enjoy when doing so?
- When choosing a restaurant, what factors do you consider most important?

#### ***General questions: aesthetic appreciation of food plating***

Based on the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics scale of Bloch et al. (2003):

- How much do you appreciate aesthetically pleasing food presentation when you're dining out? Why?
- Does a beautifully plated dish make you feel more satisfied with your dining experience? If yes, could you explain why?
- Have you ever been drawn to certain dishes or restaurants simply because of their superior food presentation?
- Do you find yourself more inclined to recommend or revisit a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of its food presentation?

#### ***Dining experience at the specific brunch restaurant:***

- Could you share your overall impression of your recent dining experience at Berries & Bite Brunch?
- Did you like the plating of the food you were served? Why or why not?
- Were there any elements in the food presentation at the restaurant that you particularly enjoyed or found unique? Did it add to your dining experience?
- Do you believe that the food presentation is a distinguishing characteristic of Berries & Bite Brunch's brand? Can you explain why you think so?

#### ***Brand experience:***

Based on Brakus et al. (2009) scale of brand experiences:

#### **Sensory dimension**

- Does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch engage your senses? How so?
- In your opinion, does Berries & Bite Brunch offer a sensory-rich dining experience?
- Can you explain how the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch influences your sensory experience there?

### **Affective dimension**

- When dining at Berries & Bite Brunch, what kinds of emotions did you experience? Did it evoke any kind of feelings?
- Would you say that Berries & Bite Brunch is a brand that resonates with you emotionally?
- In what ways, if any, does the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch affect your emotional connection with the brand?

### **Behavioural dimension**

- How did you interact with Berries & Bite Brunch during your visit? For example, did you take photos of your meal, consider writing a review, or discuss your dining experience with others?
- Do you get the impression that Berries & Bite Brunch is a brand that encourages customer interaction and engagement during the dining experience?
- Can you share any ways that the presentation of the food at Berries & Bite Brunch might have influenced your behaviours during the visit?

### **Intellectual dimension**

- Does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch pique your curiosity or provoke thought?
- Does your experience at Berries & Bite Brunch stimulate you intellectually, perhaps by making you think about food in a new way?
- Can you describe if the plating of food at Berries & Bite Brunch might contribute to this intellectual engagement? If yes, how?

### **Conclusion**

- Any comments, additions, overall opinions of the subject? Overall, what do you think, does plating have big importance when it comes to restaurants, can it improve the overall brand experience and opinion about a brand?

## Appendix B – Transcript of Focus Group 1

### Introduction

**Moderator:** Hello everyone! Thank you so much for joining today for the focus groups, it's a huge help for my Master's dissertation. As most of you know already, my research is about whether visual presentation of food can influence or enhance brand experiences in restaurants. Please note that the session is going to be recorded, as I will need to transcribe all the gathered data today. Do you give your consent to this?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Thank you. In order to respect your privacy, the recording of course will not be disclosed to anyone else besides me, and all the gathered information will be used for the purpose of this study. When analysing the data, your names will also not be shared, you will be indicated as 'participant x'. Some other important information is, that there is no right or wrong answers, please feel free to share your honest opinion. Also please respect each other and listen to each answer with no interruptions. Is everything clear to everyone then?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Great! Now let's start with a short introduction, please introduce yourselves by saying your name, age and occupation.

Participant 1.1: I'm 25 years old, and I'm a student as well as worker in the field of UX/UI design.

Participant 1.2: I'm 25 years old, and I'm a senior governmental advisor.

Participant 1.3: I'm 24 years old, and I'm an electrical engineer.

Participant 1.4: I'm 23 years old, and I'm a VAT coordinator.

Participant 1.5: I'm 24 years old and I'm a project manager at a creative agency.

**Moderator:** Thank you so much! Now, let's start off with a little bit of warming up questions, regarding your eating out habits.

### Warm-up questions

**Moderator:** How often do you eat out? Is it for a special occasion or a regular part of your everyday life?

Participant 1.1: I think I eat out once or twice a week with my friends or on a date with my boyfriend, but I also really like to celebrate special events like birthdays in restaurants.

Participant 1.2: Well, I would say that I eat at least five times a week in restaurants, or even more, as I don't really eat at home. So even for my workplace I usually go out to a restaurant to eat, but of course they are not the 'fanciest' ones.

Participant 1.3: Hm. If I also count lunches when I'm working, I would say at least three-four times a week.

Participant 1.4: Also, the same for me, three-four times a week.

Participant 1.5: I go around 3 times a week, and I also enjoy going on everyday occasions with my co-workers, friends and on dates, for me it's also a free time activity to do.

**Moderator: How often do you have brunch? Do you enjoy when doing so?**

Participant 1.1: I really like going for brunch. But I don't go that often, as I really like to eat something at home right after I wake up, and then I rather have lunch. So I think I go the most when I'm on vacation, and I have more freedom as I don't have to work.

Participant 1.2: I think I'm in the same situation. I really-really enjoy going for brunch, especially the ones where I can put my plate together, so more of like a buffet. Just like Participant 1.1, I would like to go more, but it is a bit harder to find the time and occasion for it.

Participant 1.3: I completely agree. I love brunch food so-so much, but the problem is that on weekdays due to work it's really hard to have brunch, and on the weekends, sometimes I rather have a lazy day at home after a hard week at work.

Participant 1.4: Same as for the other, brunch food is literally the best, but hard to find occasion when you have a job. Also, although I don't mind spending money on brunch, I would say that brunch places in Budapest are really overpriced.

Participant 1.5: To be honest, I love having brunch on weekends with friends, it's just a good start of a day. But like Participant 1.1, I think I also go much more when I'm on vacation, as I treat myself more on those occasions.

Participant 1.1: To reflect on Participant 1.4, I also agree that brunch restaurants are a bit overpriced. And I think the reason for this is that it has a culture.

Participant 1.3: Yes, they built a whole brand around having brunch, and its 'luxurious feeling'.

Participant 1.5: I agree, you can post it on Instagram, or on any kind of social media and it looks amazing.

Participant 1.2 : I think you kind of buy the experience of these restaurants, since at home you can do the same for much cheaper.

Participant 1.4: There's a huge profit in these restaurants.

Participant 1.3: I also think, that it is somehow considered exclusive, as there is a specific time gap for brunch, so they get money for this kind of limited time.

Participant 1.5: Yes, that's true. But I also think that nowadays more and more people also have brunch in the afternoon. Not necessarily in Budapest, but abroad there are brunch restaurants which serve people until even seven in the evening.

Participant 1.1: True, and to be honest, I could also eat these kinds of foods for breakfast, lunch or even dinner.

Participant 1.2: Definitely! But yes, like Participant 1.5 said, in Budapest I think most of these restaurants close at three in the afternoon, or don't even serve people the breakfast options later than midday.

Participant 1.3: Yes, I think they do this for this kind of exclusive, limited access, as 'brunch' would lose its magic a bit if you're eating it at six in the evening for example.

**Moderator: When choosing a restaurant, what factors do you consider most important?**

Participant 1.4: For me, value for money is important, but also I always check Google Maps before going somewhere. For me it's a necessity to have the current menu uploaded, to see the prices, the selection of food, and also pictures of how the restaurant's atmosphere is and how the food itself looks like. If I see pictures of good foods, I immediately get in the mood to eat there.

Participant 1.2: An available current menu is also really important for me. Obviously, I like to check if I even have something I would like to eat there, then see the prices and also how the restaurant itself looks like based on the pictures.

Participant 1.1: Yes for me too, it is a must to see the atmosphere of the restaurant. Also, the reviews are super important for me on Google Maps. If I see bad reviews somewhere, I really trust them and don't go to the place. I would say if there's at least five bad reviews I just don't go. I don't want to waste my money on a bad experience.

Participant 1.5: I agree with the others, nowadays I really don't go to a restaurant before checking it on Google Maps. I check the current menu, selection, go through the reviews, and also the pictures for me are really important from both the food and the ambience of the restaurant. I think these two can catch my attention the most.

Participant 1.3: I join everyone else here, Google Maps is really handy when it comes to picking restaurants. However, for me I would say the selection of food is the most important one, as well as looking at the pictures of them. So also obviously the online menu is a must for me as well.

**General questions: aesthetic appreciation of food plating**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about your overall opinions about aesthetic food plating. Do you appreciate aesthetically pleasing food presentation when you're dining out? Why?**

Participant 1.1: Absolutely. For me it's obvious that aesthetic plating influences your dining experience, and you'd eat differently a meal which is presented in a bad way.

Participant 1.2: I agree, the dining experience is completely different when you consume a nicely plated meal. For instance, I really appreciate a nice arrangement of ingredients on a plate.

Participant 1.5: It's really important for me too. I think you can really see precision, attention to detail from the restaurant, which shows me more effort, and also would think that the restaurant has more quality food.

Participant 1.2: Yes, I think not only the quality of the food, but also the quality of the whole restaurant and dining experience is better.

Participant 1.4: Definitely it has an added value and considered as a plus for me too. I think my appetite gets better if I see nice plating, and I would have a kind of satisfied feeling even before starting to eat.

Participant 1.3: I would add that although plating is really important for me as well, and I agree with the opinions so far, I think sometimes plating can be too much as well. For example plating in fine dining restaurants is too extreme, and I don't see the point of it.

Participant 1.5: Yes, in fine dining there's barely any food on the plates.

Participant 1.1: However, I would also mention that if I already have an experience with a restaurant, and I really like the food there, I could disregard the plating.

Participant 1.3: Yes, but for the first impression plating is a must, I think.

Participant 1.4: I also think that I could disregard the plating, if the food is delicious and there is a big proportion also, so the value for money is good.

Moderator: Have you ever been drawn to certain dishes or restaurants simply because of their superior food presentation?

Everyone: Yes, definitely.

Participant 1.3: There's the feeling when my stomach doesn't want more food, but my eyes do.

Participant 1.5: Yes, when you're completely full, but something looks so good you still want to try it.

Participant 1.2: So when you are hungry, visuals are even more powerful.

Participant 1.1: It also happened to me, that I saw pictures of plates on Google Maps, and I really wanted to try a restaurant.

Participant 1.5: Yes, or when you're sitting in a restaurant and you see on the table next to you a plate, and you want to have the same dish immediately just based on the look.

**Moderator: Do you find yourself more inclined to recommend or revisit a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of its food presentation?**

Participant 1.3: No.

Participant 1.1: I also don't think so.

Participant 1.2: Hm, I would say to certain people yes. If I know that someone is really only going for the looks in a restaurant, so that she/he can post it on Instagram etc., I would recommend a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of the meal. But, as I said, it would depend on the other person.

Participant 1.3: Yes, that's true. I know some people who are rather going more for pictures than the food itself.

Participant 1.5: I agree with Participant 1.2 on this. If I know a person who looks for this, I would recommend a restaurant. However, I think if I have a bad experience with the food for example, I wouldn't go back just for the looks.

Participant 1.4: Yes, if I have bad experience with the food, or maybe even with the staff or something I think plating is secondary for me.

Participant 1.1: Same for me.

**Dining experience at the specific brunch restaurant: Berries & Bite Brunch**

Moderator: Now, let's speak about our recent visit at Berries & Bite Brunch. Could you share your overall impression of your dining experience?

Participant 1.1: I liked the restaurant, but the design of the whole place was a bit too minimalistic and trying to be fancy.

Participant 1.4: Yes, I was missing a bit the cozy vibes.

Participant 1.2: I agree, although the brand is revolving around Berries, I didn't really feel a real identity in the restaurant itself. I would also prefer a more cozy and even rustic ambience.

Participant 1.5: Yes, I think the concept of the restaurant around berries is a great idea, but it could have been more dominant, apparent in the atmosphere.

Participant 1.3: Yes, although the motifs and colours of berries were there, but they were a bit too minimalistic. I think it tried too hard to appeal to the youngsters.

**Moderator: And what about the taste?**

Participant 1.5: I think the tastes were good! At least what I ate.

Participant 1.1: Yes, nothing extra or mind-blowing, but was delicious.

Participant 1.2: I agree with the others, simple but good. I enjoyed my meal.

Participant 1.3: Same for me.

Participant 1.4: Also for me.

**Moderator: Did you like the plating of the food you were served? Why or why not?**

Participant 1.2: I really like the plating. I think it was really precisely done.

Participant 1.1: Yes it was nicely done! I really liked in my avocado toast that the avocado was super nicely sliced and placed on top with some seeds. Even the shape of the bread was beautiful.

Participant 1.3: Yes, I think they've put most of their attention on the plating in this restaurant. The eggs Benedict with hollandaise sauce and chives on top looked great.

Participant 1.5: I agree, the plating was really nice! I liked the plateware also, that they were a bit simple, pastel white colours so there was a contrast with the colourful food.

Participant 1.4: I also liked a lot the plating, especially the colours, and also Participant 1.5's pancakes looked so nice with all those berries. I also paid attention to the sizes of the plates, which were greatly selected also for each dish.

Participant 1.2: Also, the hashbrown with guacamole and cheddar sauce, there the colours were really good.

**Moderator: Do you believe that the food presentation is a distinguishing characteristic of Berries & Bite Brunch's brand? Can you explain why you think so?**

Participant 1.3: I don't think so. Although the plating is really nice, I think brunch restaurant kind of have a pattern they follow.

Participant 1.1: Yes, I agree. Brunch restaurants tend to have the same kind of food, and also plating, even with the plateware itself.

Participant 1.5: I think I could recognize this restaurant from the plating, but I agree with the others that brunch restaurants follow more or less the same kind of plating style.

Participant 1.4: What I also thought that as it is Berries & Bite Brunch, I think they could have used berries in each plate maybe. Even for salty ones I think it could have made it more special.

Participant 1.2: Yes, true! Then their whole concept, and brand identity could have been seen also on the plate itself.

### **Brand experience**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about brand experiences. According to Brakus et al. (2009, p.53), brand experience is the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." Brand experience has four different dimensions: sensory, affective, behavioural, and finally intellectual. We'll examine each of these dimensions through the experience at Berries & Bite Brunch. I'll explain briefly the meanings of the dimensions in the beginning of each section.**

### **Sensory dimension**

**Moderator: Let's start with the sensory dimension. Sensory experiences are primarily focusing on customers' visual, auditory, smell, taste, and touch perceptions. Hence, it includes the activation of senses via brand exposure. So, does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch engage your senses? How so?**

Participant 1.2: I think for the visuals, when I first looked at the place, it seemed really unified, with a clear design. It had a pleasant look, although it didn't offer anything extra. I also think, that although it had a bit more minimalistic style, when looking at the motifs and arts on the wall, they were a bit overwhelming, I wouldn't start to read each of them. Also for the smelling part, I didn't really feel any kind of smells, not even coffee. As for the touch, I wouldn't say I noticed anything with it. The music was nice I think, and also the sound of other people eating and talking gave a pleasant vibe for me. And for the taste of course, my meal was delicious!

Participant 1.1: Yes, I agree with this! There was this berries wall art which explained all the benefits of the fruits, and I got a bit overwhelmed with all the information at one place.

Besides visuals, I think mostly my hearing and tasting were engaged. Touching is not relevant, I think, and I also missed a bit the smell of baked goods and coffee.

Participant 1.5: As for me, obviously as we're speaking about a restaurant my tasting was engaged, which was good. As for the visuals, of course the interior design engaged my eyes, I had to look around, and also for me I've read for example the benefits of the berries. The background noises and music was pleasant for me, it rather gave me a cozy vibe than the visuals for example. As for the touching and smelling, I wouldn't say there was anything particular to engage them.

Participant 1.3: I agree, my taste, sight, and hearing were engaged, but the other senses not necessarily.

Participant 1.4: I join the others on this.

**Moderator: Can you explain how the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch influences your sensory experience there?**

Participant 1.1: If the plating would have been not nice, I think my sensory experience would have been way worse. Visually, the plating really engaged me with its colours and arrangement of ingredients. I ate it with a bigger appetite and added value.

Participant 1.2: Yes, as for my sight, the plating really exceeded my expectations. Visually, it really enhanced my dining experience.

Participant 1.5: I agree! Maybe another sense that I could mention is the hearing, because on my pancakes there were the fresh berries, which were more 'crunchy' I would say.

Participant 1.4: That's a good point, it was a good contrast in textures with for example the eggs Benedict and the fresh salad next to it.

Participant 1.3: For me, also the plating influenced my visual experience a lot.

### **Affective dimension**

**Moderator: Now, we continue on with the affective dimension. Affective experiences include all of the feelings, emotions and moods sparked by interacting with brands. In simple terms, it captures the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand. When dining at Berries & Bite Brunch, what kinds of emotions did you experience? Did it evoke any kind of feelings?**

Participant 1.1: Hm. I think I didn't really have any kind of deep feelings, I felt pleasant in the restaurant.

Participant 1.2: I also had a pleasant feeling through the experience, and when I was looking at the food options, and even waiting for the food it made me really excited. However, I also got a little bit of more negative feelings when the waiter was a bit neutral and grumpy.

Participant 1.5: I wouldn't really say that I had any particular emotions, but I was excited too when the food arrived, and I usually feel calm when I can eat good food in a nice place with good people. But I agree with Participant 1.2, it can be a bit of a mood killer, when I saw that the waiter just seems to be irritated by the guests.

Participant 1.4: Yes, I got really excited when looking at the menu, because the selection of the food was great, and also just reading the ingredients of the meals made me feel hyped about the upcoming meal.

Participant 1.3: The excitement is true, but otherwise I think there wasn't really bigger emotions that was evoked by the restaurant itself.

**Moderator: In what ways, if any, does the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch affect your emotional connection with the brand?**

Participant 1.5: I don't think the presentation of food really affects my feelings about the brand. However, for me beautiful plating indicates attention to precision, creativity and the overall experience, so I would think more positively about the brand and trust the restaurant more.

Participant 1.1: I agree with this, except the creativity. I think as we mentioned before, basically all brunch restaurants do the same plates.

Participant 1.4: Yes, I wouldn't say that you can only get this plate at Berries & Bite Brunch.

Participant 1.2: I think I got the wow feeling from the plate, but after the whole experience at the restaurant, my feelings towards the brand were influenced by various things, and I cannot narrow it down only to the plating.

Participant 1.3: Yes, I agree. My feelings at the end could be based on multiple factors, so also with the taste, the staff, the atmosphere etc.

### **Behavioural dimension**

**Moderator: Let's continue with the behavioural dimension. Behavioural experiences can encourage certain physical acts, behaviours, and lifestyles after interacting with a brand. So, what do you think, how did you interact with Berries & Bite Brunch during your visit? For example, did you take photos of your meal, consider writing a review, or discuss your dining experience with others?**

Participant 1.5: I took photos and I think will also share my experience with friends and family. Also, as I said I was reading all the benefits of berries on the wall, so I think I will try to eat more in future!

Participant 1.1: I actually posted an Instagram story, but not sure if I would start recommending people the restaurant, but if they ask about it, I would share my experience.

Participant 1.4: I also took pictures, as the plates looked nice.

Participant 1.2: Yes, I think everyone did pictures actually!

**Moderator: Do you think that the presentation of the food at Berries & Bite Brunch might have influenced your behaviours during the visit (e.g.: taking picture, writing review, revisiting the restaurant etc.)?**

Participant 1.5: The plating for sure made me take photos, and also share it on Instagram. And maybe it also inspired me to get some good fresh healthy ingredients and try to recreate the dishes myself.

Participant 1.3: That's true! I thought there that I really want to try to do the eggs Benedict by myself at home.

Participant 1.2: Yes, I agree, I actually only made pictures from the meals, so that was completely due to the plating itself!

### **Intellectual dimension**

**Moderator: And finally, the intellectual dimension. Intellectual experiences involve creative and analytical thinking, as well as curiosity enhanced by interactions with a brand. Does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch pique your curiosity or provoke thought?**

Participant 1.1: Hm. Actually, the minimalistic design, and as I was not really impressed by the interior atmosphere, made me think about how can the place be a bit more cozy.

Participant 1.5: I would say that the variety in their menu made me curious about certain dishes, especially the ones with more special ingredients.

Participant 1.2: Honestly, I haven't thought about it that way before. I mean that a restaurant could influence me intellectually. I enjoyed the food here, but I wouldn't say it particularly sparked any deep thoughts or curiosity in me.

Participant 1.4: I agree, with Participant 1.5, I really liked for example also the Hollandaise sauce on the eggs Benedict so it made me think about its ingredients and what could be that special added spice.

**Moderator: Can you describe if the plating of food at Berries & Bite Brunch might contribute to this intellectual engagement? If yes, how?**

Participant 1.3: I think the plating there could definitely give inspiration to guests.

Participant 1.1: For instance, it made me think about how can I also slice the avocado this way.

Participant 1.5: Or even it actually made me think about how ingredients can be arranged on a plate.

Participant 1.2: I think their plating style, while beautiful, is more about aesthetics for me. It doesn't particularly drive any intellectual engagement, but it does enhance the overall experience.

### **Conclusion**

**Moderator: We arrived at the end of the focus group. Overall, what do you think, does plating have big importance when it comes to restaurants, can it improve the overall brand experience and opinion about a brand?**

Participant 1.3: Definitely! I would even say that this place was basically saved by the appealing presentation of food. I think the taste itself was good but not that special, also the atmosphere, and the staff was not the nicest. So, for me, definitely the plating was a nice point of the experience. However, I would say that still my overall opinion about a brand and experience with a brand cannot be changed just because the plating was nice.

Participant 1.2: I agree with Participant 1.3. In my overall experience with the brand, the plating was the most positive and memorable. However, a good restaurant brand cannot be only about the plating.

Participant 1.4: I also think that the plating was nice, but not that extra for me to come back. For this one-time experience was okay, but I have to consider other factors as well when choosing a restaurant to visit or re-visit.

Participant 1.1: I think for me, taste is the most important. Even though I appreciate good plating, it's not the most important thing. But I have to say that a nice presentation does make a good first impression and I would have more positive feelings towards a brand.

Participant 1.5: Plating has a crucial role for sure. Even more so now that everyone shares photos of their meals on social media. A restaurant can basically get free advertising from a dish that is beautifully plated. So, it's not the only thing, but it does help the brand's image as a whole.

## Appendix C – Transcript of Focus Group 2

### Introduction

**Moderator:** Hello everyone! Thank you so much for joining today for the focus groups, it's a huge help for my Master's dissertation. As most of you know already, my research is about whether visual presentation of food can influence or enhance brand experiences in restaurants. Please note that the session is going to be recorded, as I will need to transcribe all the gathered data today. Do you give your consent to this?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Thank you. In order to respect your privacy, the recording of course will not be disclosed to anyone else besides me, and all the gathered information will be used for the purpose of this study. When analysing the data, your names will also not be shared, you will be indicated as 'participant x'. Some other important information is, that there is no right or wrong answers, please feel free to share your honest opinion. Also please respect each other and listen to each answer with no interruptions. Is everything clear to everyone then?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Great! Now let's start with a short introduction, please introduce yourselves by saying your name, age and occupation.

Participant 2.1: I'm 23 years old and I'm a business informatics Bsc student.

Participant 2.2: I'm 24 years old and I'm an accountant.

Participant 2.3: I'm 24 years old and I'm a public servant.

Participant 2.4: I'm 23 years old and I'm a make-up artist.

Participant 2.5: I'm 24 years old, and I'm an economist.

**Moderator:** Thank you so much! Now, let's start off with a little bit of warming up questions, regarding your eating out habits.

### Warm-up questions

**Moderator:** How often do you eat out? Is it for a special occasion or a regular part of your everyday life?

Participant 2.1: I tend to go to more fancy restaurants only occasionally, and more regularly to casual or fast-food restaurants. In that case, I would say even twice a week.

Participant 2.2: It depends on the type of the restaurant, if it's kind of fancy, then only on special occasions like getting together with the family, otherwise approximately only once a week with friends.

Participant 2.4: I eat out pretty frequently, like once or twice a week with friends. And I also always eat at the restaurant at my workplace. There is a decent restaurant and I always have my lunch there.

Participant 2.2: Oh yeah, I often eat at the restaurant at work as well.

Participant 2.3: I also eat at the restaurant at my workplace, other than that only once or twice every two weeks with my partner or friends.

Participant 2.5: I usually only eat at restaurants on special occasions like family gatherings, birthdays etc., once or twice a month. And I also eat at the cafeteria at work daily.

**Moderator: How often do you have brunch? Do you enjoy when doing so?**

Participant 2.1: I love brunch restaurants, but for some reason I go to those places very rarely, mostly because of the timing of it. I also think it's not a well-known concept in Hungary, it doesn't have its culture here yet like abroad. So I think I mostly do it abroad on holidays.

Participant 2.2: I think they are getting more and more popular in Budapest too, in the last years so many brunch restaurants opened.

Participant 2.1: Well yes, they are starting to.

Participant 2.2: I really like brunch food and restaurants, but like Participant 2.1, I think it's hard to find time for it due to my work.

Participant 2.4: I love to brunch, I think it really gives a special feeling and a nice way to start the day or the weekend. But I don't do it really often, because it can be a bit overpriced. For the same price you can have a proper lunch/dinner meal not an omelette (which does not even have expensive ingredients).

Szami: Same for me, I also think it's very expensive. I love the food and ambience of brunch restaurants, but I go more often to have a coffee at these places. In fact, I go almost every week, they have amazing coffee always.

Participant 2.5: I mostly go to brunch restaurants when I'm abroad. I really connect it with pleasure and holidays.

Participant 2.2: Oh yeah, me too when I'm abroad. It's perfect to start the day with a brunch in a foreign city.

**Moderator: When choosing a restaurant, what factors do you consider most important?**

Participant 2.3: For me it's location. Is it close to me, or far? How long is it open? I think these things come first, so the kind of convenience of the restaurant. After this, I take into consideration how good the restaurant looks, its overall vibe, the selection of food and also the prices.

Participant 2.1: Location is important for me too, as well as the items on the menu, the price, and the way the restaurant looks and feels. If the atmosphere is not appealing, then I'm not going there. I always check on Google Maps.

Participant 2.5: For me it's really important to have a wide variety of food on the menu, and thus also that I can check the menu before online.

Participant 2.4: I like to choose restaurants based on recommendations. For example, when I see that someone had a nice dish, or was in a nice-looking place on Instagram. I mostly find and choose restaurants this way, so through other friends, and family members mostly.

Participant 2.2: Yeah, it's the recommendations for me too. And not only from friends or family, but also maybe on Google Maps or Trip Advisor. I think this way you can really find amazing restaurants.

### **General questions: aesthetic appreciation of food plating**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about your overall opinions about aesthetic food plating. Do you appreciate aesthetically pleasing food presentation when you're dining out? Why?**

Participant 2.4: Yes, absolutely. I think even a schnitzel with simple potatoes can become so much more enjoyable if it is made and presented carefully and beautifully. Everything is better if the plate is made nicely.

Participant 2.1: I agree! I think it can really add to the dining experience and I always eat with more pleasure when they pay attention to the presentation as well.

Participant 2.2: Yes, I also really appreciate it. I also like to post on social media quite a lot, so for me nice plating also really matters.

Participant 2.3: It does have an added value. I also feel like the restaurant is more precise and puts more effort into the plates as well.

Participant 2.5: I agree with all the opinions so far. Although I would say taste is more important for me personally, plating is definitely part of the whole experience in a restaurant.

**Moderator: Have you ever been drawn to certain dishes or restaurants simply because of their superior food presentation?**

Participant 2.4: Well, I think this is the first thing that gets the attention of people. For example, someone posts something, you see it, and at that time you don't know how it tastes or anything, so that's the first impression of the dish and the restaurant itself.

Participant 2.1: Yes, however I don't know whether that's the presentation, or the food itself. Like, if I see someone eating a nicely presented meat, and I start to crave that. That could be because of the presentation, but not necessarily. Could be both actually.

Participant 2.2: Yes I agree. I think there are cases when I get a really nicely presented plate of sushi, but someone who hates sushi can say „Wow, that looks really good!”, but they won't order it.

Participant 2.3: For sure I connect aesthetics with good quality ingredients. So plating does matter to me, but I wouldn't necessarily choose a restaurant based on the presentation of food. I rather look at the ingredients of the meal and I choose what I like.

Participant 2.4: Yeah, for example there is a restaurant called „Náncsi néni's”, I don't know if you guys know it. It's a totally simple, authentic place, but the food is so good, that you don't care about the presentation, you go there for the flavours. I happily go back there frequently, and it isn't because of the presentation.

Participant 2.5: Yes, I think there are places where you don't care about the plating, because the taste is so good. You go there for taste not for looks.

**Moderator: Do you find yourself more inclined to recommend or revisit a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of its food presentation?**

Participant 2.4: Well, it depends. If for me the overall experience was good, the presentation, the flavours, the service, etc., then yes, but if the food or the service is bad, then I would not recommend only because of aesthetic plating.

Participant 2.1: Exactly, I completely agree! I think if the taste for example is bad, for sure I wouldn't recommend or revisit a restaurant again.

Participant 2.2: Same for me!

Participant 2.5: And also the same opinion from me.

Participant 2.3: I also agree, however, if I know that the person loves looks and aesthetic plating, maybe I didn't like it, but I would still recommend it anyway, maybe they will have a great experience as they focus more on other factors of a dining experience.

**Dining experience at the specific brunch restaurant: Berries & Bite Brunch**

**Moderator: Now, let's speak about our recent visit at Berries & Bite Brunch. Could you share your overall impression of your dining experience?**

Participant 2.1: I liked it, it was a nice, stylish place. Bit minimalistic. My food was also really good.

Participant 2.4: It was a good one-time experience, but I wasn't the biggest fan. The colour of berries and white in the interior design looked pretty. But I think it wasn't anything special. However, the food was good.

Participant 2.3: I agree, it was pretty but they could've gotten so much more out of design, since I like the idea of berries as a creative concept. However, I really liked the menu and

the selection of food. That was great, just enough options, not overwhelming but also enough to choose from.

Participant 2.5: I actually think that the berries concept was visible in their interior design, and I liked that they had this unique style. The service was also okay, but could have been a bit better I think. The food was delicious, but nothing special, kind of average.

Participant 2.2: I liked it, but I also think it could've been prettier. It was a nice place, but not so much that I would go back. I would prefer a bit more cozy place. But I have to say my food was really delicious. Also, as Participant 2.3 said I liked the menu. There was something for everyone, both sweet and salty, and still not overwhelming.

Participant 2.3: Regarding the design, I agree on that. It could have been a bit more friendly and cozy for a brunch place, not this minimalistic.

Participant 2.4: Yes, this could have been done if the restaurant pays more attention on smaller details, like I don't know, plants etc.

Participant 2.2: Unfortunately, nowadays it's becoming a thing, this more minimalistic style, without any special attention on details.

**Moderator: Did you like the plating of the food you were served? Why or why not?**

Everyone: Yes, the plates themselves looked really nice!

**Moderator: Were there any elements in the food presentation at the restaurant that you particularly enjoyed or found unique?**

Participant 2.5: I liked the overall picture of the plates. There was a good harmony on them, with the colours, shapes and also the arrangement of ingredients on the plate.

Participant 2.4: I liked the pastel white plates, it looked nice with the colourful food. However, I didn't feel like it was a really special plating style, most brunch places actually have this kind.

Participant 2.2: Yes, I could see they made plates carefully, paying attention on the details. I think the bright colour of my cheddar sauce was a plus for me, I loved it.

Participant 2.1: I think for me too the colours caught my attention the most. The purple beetroot hummus on my toast, and also the kind of green oil on top of the pastel white plate looked amazing for example.

Participant 2.3: I would also say the plate looked nice, and also the eggs Benedict with a bit of chives on top was a good touch.

**Moderator: Do you believe that the food presentation is a distinguishing characteristic of Berries & Bite Brunch's brand?**

Everyone: No.

Participant 2.1: I think it was beautiful, but average in a way, since all brunch restaurants go for this kind of food plating, as Participant 2.4 mentioned before.

Participant 2.3: For me, I really think if they would have put berries on the plates it would have made it really creative and special.

Participant 2.2: Yes, I really agree with this! Their name is Berries & Bite Brunch, they could have played with this identity a bit even on the plates.

Participant 2.5: Yes, I really think this could have been a unique selling point of the restaurant, especially of their plating. This could have set them apart from the other brunch restaurants.

### **Brand experience**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about brand experiences. According to Brakus et al. (2009, p.53), brand experience is the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." Brand experience has four different dimensions: sensory, affective, behavioural and finally intellectual. We'll examine each of these dimensions through the experience at Berries & Bite Brunch. I'll explain briefly the meanings of the dimensions in the beginning of each section.**

### **Sensory dimension**

**Moderator: Let's start with the sensory dimension. Sensory experiences are primarily focusing on customers' visual, auditory, smell, taste, and touch perceptions. Hence, it includes the activation of senses via brand exposure. So, does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch engage your senses? How so?**

Participant 2.5: I think, visually yes. Regarding the interior I had no problems, I've found it pleasant as well as the plates. As for hearing, smelling and touching, I think those senses were not engaged. Obviously tasting was as we speak about a restaurant.

Participant 2.2: Yes, I agree with this! It would have been nice to have a bit more background music, I didn't really hear anything. Also for the smell, I really missed it. When I pass by restaurants and they have a good smell, I immediately consider going in, so that could be a huge plus actually.

Participant 2.3: I think it could be hard to make smell, it always depends on where the kitchen is.

Participant 2.2: Yes, of course, but I still missed it.

Participant 2.4: When I first entered, I actually had a nice visual experience. I really liked the combination of colours. I started to pay attention more on the details actually when we sat down and had more time to observe. I think my sight was engaged, but what I thought

also, the staff could have worn nicer clothes, that could also have been in the colour of the berries for example.

Participant 2.1: Yes, that would actually look really nice! I agree with the others, as for my senses, of course seeing and tasting were there, but the others not that much.

**Moderator: Can you explain how the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch influences your sensory experience there?**

Participant 2.1: As for visuals, absolutely. When I saw the food my appetite got so much better immediately, and it really engaged my sight, I think.

Participant 2.4: Yes, I agree with that! I wouldn't say it engaged any other senses besides the eyes.

Participant 2.3: Hm. Maybe some crunchy elements on the plate engaged a bit of the hearing. But not really in a noticeable way, it just came to my mind as we are talking about this.

Participant 2.5: Visually, it really made the sensory experience better.

Participant 2.2: Same for me! Maybe even what Participant 2.3 said, also some crunchy elements on the plate enhanced the sensory experience.

### **Affective dimension**

**Moderator: Now, we continue on with the affective dimension. Affective experiences include all of the feelings, emotions and moods sparked by interacting with brands. In simple terms, it captures the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand. When dining at Berries & Bite Brunch, what kinds of emotions did you experience? Did it evoke any kind of feelings?**

Participant 2.2: It was a nice feeling to eat out with you. I was also excited for the dining experience, as well as for the food.

Participant 2.3: I also felt excitement, even when looking at the menu and going through the options. And I also had a pleasant feeling throughout the brunch.

Participant 2.5: I think I didn't really have any kind of strong emotion or feelings. I was just happy to eat.

Participant 2.1: I also had the excited feeling for eating out. But that's it, I think.

Participant 2.4: I didn't really have a warm/cozy feeling, so nothing really evoked emotions.

**Moderator: In what ways, if any, does the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch affect your emotional connection with the brand?**

Participant 2.1: If I only take into account the plating, for me it evoked positive feelings towards the brand.

Participant 2.3: Yes, I agree. As I mentioned before, nice plating for me also represents quality and precision. This makes me have more positive and pleasant connection with the brand.

Participant 2.4: I agree with the others, however, I think for me other factors are also really important. So although the plating was nice, it didn't really help to build an emotional connection with the brand.

Participant 2.5: Yes, I also agree. Although the aesthetic plating shows me that they put effort in their plates, based on the staff and some other factors, the experience was not that outstanding that I would feel closer to the brand.

Participant 2.2: I would say the same.

### **Behavioural dimension**

**Moderator: Let's continue with the behavioural dimension. Behavioural experiences can encourage certain physical acts, behaviours, and lifestyles after interacting with a brand. So, what do you think, how did you interact with Berries & Bite Brunch during your visit? For example, did you take photos of your meal, consider writing a review, or discuss your dining experience with others?**

Participant 2.2: I made pictures of the food and already posted on Instagram actually.

Participant 2.1: I took pictures. I wouldn't write a review, but I would tell my friends and family how the experience was if they ask about it.

Participant 2.3: I made pictures also!

Participant 2.5: I didn't really interact with the brand I think. Also took pictures, but I didn't really think of that as interaction.

Participant 2.4: Same for me.

**Moderator: Do you think that the presentation of the food at Berries & Bite Brunch might have influenced your behaviours during the visit (e.g.: taking picture, writing review, revisiting the restaurant etc.)?**

Participant 2.5: Actually, now that I think about it, the plating made me try eggs Benedict. I'm not really a big fan of it, but as I saw it on Participant 2.3's plate, I asked for a bite as it looked really good.

Participant 2.1: Yes, the pictures I took was only because of the plating.

Participant 2.2: Same here, took pictures only from the food not the restaurant's interior design or something. And I also posted them on Instagram because it looked aesthetic.

Participant 2.3: I also thought about recreating the plates at home. Maybe they are not that hard, the ingredients are easy to get for example.

Participant 2.4: Yes, that's true! I think these plates are easy to recreate at home, and would be cheaper for sure.

### **Intellectual dimension**

**Moderator: And finally, the intellectual dimension. Intellectual experiences involve creative and analytical thinking, as well as curiosity enhanced by interactions with a brand. Does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch pique your curiosity or provoke thought?**

Participant 2.5: I had a thought that it wouldn't be that complicated to start a business in this field.

Participant 2.1: I was actually reading the wall art of berries, all the benefits of the fruits, so that made me think a bit.

Participant 2.2: I was thinking about how crazy it is that you can make a huge business out of breakfast. From a simple breakfast, you can create something that feels fancy, available for the upper class, when it's just about eggs and sausages. Yet, it's presented and executed in a way that makes it high class.

Participant 2.4: Yes. Because it's served nicely and has all the little decorations on it, it sells for ten times as much, even though it gives the same experience in taste as home. But visually it's completely different, which is really interesting.

**Moderator: Can you describe if the plating of food at Berries & Bite Brunch might contribute to this intellectual engagement? If yes, how?**

Participant 2.3: I find it interesting how they put together a meal with items I wouldn't think of. For example, on your plate Participant 2.2, I really liked the combination, I wouldn't have thought it would be nice to have hashbrown with avocado, cheddar and stuff like that. And how well they go together.

Participant 2.2: Yes, for sure it can give inspiration. I even thought, next time when guests are coming over, I could think of similar combination of food.

Participant 2.1: To be honest, for me, a plating cannot really evoke any intellectual thoughts.

Participant 2.4: Same for me.

Participant 2.5: Plating at this restaurant might just made me think about food in another way, due to combination of ingredients etc.

### **Conclusion**

**Moderator: We arrived at the end of the focus group. Overall, what do you think, does plating have big importance when it comes to restaurants, can it improve the overall brand experience and opinion about a brand?**

Participant 2.4: I think an experience with a brand, and my overall opinion depends on various things. Obviously, plating is crucial when it comes to restaurants. It grabs people's attention, like „Oh my god, that looks so good, I want to visit that place!“. I think the design, looks and overall presentation of a brand can convince people, to choose it. However, its more about first impressions, I think. For example, today, I wasn't really satisfied with other things in the restaurant, such as the ambience, the staff, and also the food was not extra special. So, although the plating is nice, I have to look at the bigger picture.

Participant 2.3: To be honest, I think plating is pretty much the same everywhere. Playing with colours and shapes etc., I don't really see difference in them. So, I definitely go for the taste rather.

Participant 2.1: I would say also the style of the restaurant could define the importance of plating. For instance, in a brunch restaurant I do expect a nice plating, and it's really important for the experience. However, if I go to a traditional old Hungarian restaurant with huge proportions, I would be confused to get a plate like today. So, the plating for me differs from restaurant to restaurant, but I do believe that attention to this factor could make a better picture of the brand in my mind.

Participant 2.2: I've already been to restaurants where the plating was amazing, really aesthetic, but when I ate it, I felt the ingredients were not the best for example, and they only went for the looks. So, in that case, I had a pretty bad experience with the brand. I think as the others said, in restaurants it is one of the important factors to consider, but just a nice plate is not going to make a great brand.

Participant 2.5: I agree with this. I think if I eat something I don't like, as beautiful as the plate is, I wouldn't recommend this restaurant brand to others. There are times when you go to a very simple place with a simple menu, but you go back because of the flavours and the quality ingredients. So, despite the plating, you still go back.

## Appendix D – Transcript of Focus Group 3

### Introduction

**Moderator:** Hello everyone! Thank you so much for joining today for the focus groups, it's a huge help for my Master's dissertation. As most of you know already, my research is about whether visual presentation of food can influence or enhance brand experiences in restaurants. Please note that the session is going to be recorded, as I will need to transcribe all the gathered data today. Do you give your consent to this?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Thank you. In order to respect your privacy, the recording of course will not be disclosed to anyone else besides me, and all the gathered information will be used for the purpose of this study. When analysing the data, your names will also not be shared, you will be indicated as 'participant x'. Some other important information is, that there is no right or wrong answers, please feel free to share your honest opinion. Also please respect each other and listen to each answer with no interruptions. Is everything clear to everyone then?

Everyone: Yes.

**Moderator:** Great! Now let's start with a short introduction, please introduce yourselves by saying your name, age and occupation.

Participant 3.1: I'm 24 years old, and I studied communications and fashion, and at the moment I'm looking for a job, but at the same time I am a content creator.

Participant 3.2: I'm 24 years old, and I'm a Master's student in Psychology.

Participant 3.3: I'm 23 years old, I study hospitality and tourism and currently is a receptionist.

Participant 3.4: I'm 25 years old, and I'm an economist.

Participant 3.5: I'm 24, and I just graduated as a landscape architect.

### Warm-up questions

**Moderator:** How often do you eat out? Is it for a special occasion or a regular part of your everyday life?

Participant 3.1: Oh, it kind of makes me feel guilty, because I eat out pretty often, especially now in the summer with holidays, I always eat out. Sometimes just street food, but often in restaurants where we sit in. And I'm quite a hedonist regarding food, I love it very much, so I eat out often.

Participant 3.2: Yes, I eat out often too. I don't know, if we meet with friends we tend to go eat somewhere. When I don't have the time to make my own food, then I just go somewhere

to eat. And it's a leisure time activity and an experience, so it's not just for occasions for me, it's part of my everyday life, like I eat out once every day in some form.

Participant 3.3: I go to restaurants mostly on occasions, when I celebrate, and I don't know if it counts, but I quite often order food. So, I don't eat out, but I eat restaurant food at home.

Participant 3.4: Well, in the past I almost never did. But nowadays I choose to eat out like once or twice a week, rather twice. It could be a kebab restaurant on the corner, or it could be a brunch place like this one was. So, the quality and the price is really different for me each time.

Participant 3.5: I eat at restaurants like two or three times a week, but I just step out of work to eat, because I didn't have time to cook. However, I also like cooking, so I do it a lot at home, and it's also more cost efficient. So, when I do go to restaurants, I like to have a good experience with some meals I would not be able to prepare at home.

**Moderator: How often do you have brunch? Do you enjoy when doing so?**

Participant 3.1: I really, really like to have brunch. What's interesting is that I tend to connect brunch with vacations and travelling, so I don't even know a lot of brunch places here, where I live. I don't really think at home „Oh let's go have a brunch" ever, but when I travel somewhere I kind of need at least one or two brunches. I think it's part of the experience, it starts the day, it's cozy and chill, like you get a main dish but it's a breakfast, so yeah, I really like it.

Participant 3.2: I really like it too, breakfast is my favourite meal, so it's nice to do it properly, like a big breakfast dish to start the day. However, it rarely happens that I have the time to go to a brunch restaurant at like eleven in the morning, because of work it's hard to have a 'slow morning', but still, I like it very much.

Participant 3.3: I like brunch places and its food. However, I think they are overpriced. Obviously you pay for the experience as a whole, the services, but for me it's too much, three to four thousand forints for what I could easily make at home for much less. For example, an English breakfast is: you just put beans out of a can, you make two fried eggs and bacon, and that's it. For me, it's too much, and I think here the price was kind of fine, but there are places where they are out of touch and charge whatever people may be willing to pay. So although I do enjoy having brunch, it's a bit annoying if you think about the prices they ask. But, for example, I had brunch on my birthday, my friends took me to out and it was really nice, so I can connect it to special occasions. It's nice that I didn't just eat some cereal, but something more special.

Participant 3.4: I think the same. I think brunching is a luxurious thing to do, but I think I'd do it like once a month, because it's a nice experience. So, I think it's worth it occasionally.

Participant 3.5: Well, I have mixed feelings, because it's really nice and they can come up with really good and innovative foods, and they are usually different from each other, like

each restaurant has its own profile, they make different dishes. Obviously, there are the typical brunch meals, but there is always a little difference. However, I know that you can make them at home for much less, so I could even just invite friends over and we have a brunch at home. So, it's strange, there's a good and a bad side of this.

Participant 3.4: I would add something here. I think the ideal time for a brunch is eleven, eleven-thirty. Because then maybe you haven't had breakfast yet, so you crave a big breakfast. But then you normally skip lunch after it, so you could basically do two meals at once, which could be kind of worth it.

Participant 3.5: Yeah, and I would add that I often brunch at home on the weekends, when I sleep in, so it's a bigger meal and then I only eat after that in the late afternoon. Maybe even skip lunch and just have dinner even later.

**Moderator: When choosing a restaurant, what factors do you consider most important?**

Participant 3.1: I think I always look at the ratings on Google Maps, like if I want to eat out somewhere, I look up where are the closest possibilities, I look at the pictures, „do I like their pictures?“, „does the place look good?“, I read some reviews, and I choose based on that.

Participant 3.2: I think for me, the first is recommendations. If someone already said that „Oh, this one's really good!“, then I'm more likely to try it, because I feel like I have to experience it too. It might be FOMO, or it's just that I know that someone has already had a great experience there. Plus, obviously it depends on what I crave, I look at Instagram pages to see what they do, how are the foods presented, how is the atmosphere etc. So yeah, the atmosphere is important too.

Participant 3.3: I tend to choose based on recommendations too. And for me it's good if the place has an aesthetic appeal, but the emphasis is on the food.

Participant 3.4: Well, as for me, I choose almost everything in a way that first I decide how much I want to pay, and then I choose something that I can afford for that amount. Like looking for a flat for example, and choosing a restaurant is the same for me. First the price, and then the selection of food, the atmosphere etc.

Participant 3.5: I consider the price to be the most important, I don't like overpriced places. And the atmosphere, the general ambience. I don't want loud, bad music, it should be clean, it shouldn't smell bad, like a pub. And the waiters have to be nice and customer centric, I think that's important.

**General questions: aesthetic appreciation of food plating**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about your overall opinions about aesthetic food plating. Do you appreciate aesthetically pleasing food presentation when you're dining out? Why?**

Participant 3.3: Yes, plating is super important, it's obvious for me. Even at home I try to arrange my food in a nice way, to have a better eating experience. So, I think for restaurants, it's a must to plate in an aesthetic way. I would also add, that when we eat, we obviously use multiple senses, so also smelling and seeing is activated for instance. Thus, all senses are included in a dining experience, and restaurants should pay attention to this.

Participant 3.2: I also agree with this. When someone goes to a restaurant, they also pay for the experience, not just for the food. Therefore, the experience also includes plates, which has been done aesthetically and precisely, that you might not be able to do at home. Otherwise, I could also just eat food at home. So from restaurants, I expect a nice plate which adds value to the visuals, as I pay the price for it.

Participant 3.1: I completely agree with everything that has been mentioned so far. I would also add, that as I'm a content creator, I'm posting quite a lot on social media. So, for me it's especially important to have aesthetic plates, since I would post it on Instagram, TikTok etc. If they don't look good enough, I don't post them. I like the feeling when the food arrives, and I have the urge to take pictures, it looks so amazing.

Participant 3.5: Plating is really important, I think so as well. I love it also when the plating itself is connected to the particular meal and represents also the cuisine. I eat those dishes with more pleasure.

Participant 3.4: Same for me. I think we all agree that if aesthetic plating would not be present in restaurants, they would just be food from the canteen.

**Moderator: Have you ever been drawn to certain dishes or restaurants simply because of their superior food presentation?**

Participant 3.4: A lot of times it happened to me, that I was in a restaurant, and I saw a plate there from another guest, and I just thought 'I need that dish now'.

Participant 3.1: I think when you look up a restaurant online, the pictures will be the ones mostly influencing your decision. Even if you notice or not, if you see a picture of a dish which was just thrown on a plate without any attention, you will not think you really want to visit that restaurant. Thus, to be honest I never thought I would go to a restaurant only for the plating, but maybe unconsciously I did multiple times.

Participant 3.3: I think wouldn't go to a restaurant only because of the plating, but for me it's a huge added value and also a factor I consider when choosing a place to eat.

Participant 3.2: I think I could really be influenced by aesthetic plating. I associate a beautiful plate with quality and an overall special experience. So maybe we just speak about an omelette, if it's nicely plated it would enhance my dining experience a lot. So restaurants can definitely buy me with the looks.

Participant 3.5: I completely agree with everyone, plating can add huge value, and also enhance the experience for which you pay in a restaurant. However, for example when looking up Google Maps, I think I look at multiple factors not only the plating style.

**Moderator: Do you find yourself more inclined to recommend or revisit a restaurant because of the aesthetic appeal of its food presentation?**

Participant 3.2: I think if the food was bad, I would not revisit nor I would recommend it to someone, even if the plate was beautiful. I think looks can draw you to places, but in order to revisit and recommend a place, it matters whether the food was delicious, the staff and the ambience was good etc.

Participant 3.5: Yes, completely agree. It depends on multiple factors.

Participant 3.4: Yes. It's crucial as a first impression, but then you consider a lot of other things.

**Dining experience at the specific brunch restaurant: Berries & Bite Brunch**

**Moderator: Now, let's speak about our recent visit at Berries & Bite Brunch. Could you share your overall impression of your dining experience?**

Participant 3.4: I liked the place, I had a nice experience. I would say I had better brunch experiences before, but for me the value for money was fair and my meal was delicious.

Participant 3.1: To be honest, I wasn't the biggest fan of the place. It was nice, I liked the concept of the berries, however, I didn't really feel a real brand identity behind it. The design was a bit too minimalistic and just trying to appeal to a younger audience. Besides that, my meal was good.

Participant 3.5: Yes, I agree with this. I think the meal was good, the staff was nice, but the interior could have been a bit cosier.

Participant 3.3: I would also say that they could have work more on the identity of the place, because the concept of berries is actually a good idea. For instance, I really liked that the colours reflected a bit the brand, we could see it on the logo, the interior design, as well as the menu.

Participant 3.2: Yes, also mixed feelings for me. I think the food selection was nice, also the staff, and the colours I also liked of the berries. But they could have made the interior much more cozy for a brunch place.

**Moderator: Did you like the plating of the food you were served? Why or why not?**

Participant 3.2: I think the plating was aesthetic and nicely done, but nothing special, just like in other brunch restaurants. I mean I would add that I had English breakfast, so I think the plating is kind of obvious of that in every restaurant. But, I really liked the plateware itself, I think they were beautiful.

Participant 3.3: Yes, I also think it was nicely done, but nothing crazy creative. Like other brunch places. I agree with Participant 3.2 about the plateware, they were really nice, as well as the glass of my lemonade.

Participant 3.1: To be honest, I really liked the plating of the oatmeal. It was good with the fresh berries, with also the spots of the jam on top. That one looked the best, I think.

Participant 3.4: For me the plates looked nice. The contrast of the colours on the white pastel plate looked cool.

Participant 3.5: Yes, the colours I also liked on the plate. I could also see that they made the plate with attention and precision.

**Moderator: Do you believe that the food presentation is a distinguishing characteristic of Berries & Bite Brunch's brand? Can you explain why you think so?**

Everyone: No, I don't think so.

Participant 3.5: I think while the plating was nicely done, it cannot really be considered as a distinguishing characteristic, it wasn't that unique.

Participant 3.3: I was thinking that they could make plating easily as a distinguishing characteristic, by adding berries to each dish. That would be really special I think and no other brunch places have that.

Participant 3.1: Yes, such a good idea! I think as most of the plates have salad on the side for instance, they could easily add a couple of berries, and could even be a plus in flavours.

Participant 3.4: Yes, that would be a plus for sure, and a unique selling point! However, maybe it would be a bit corny at the end.

Participant 3.5: Yes, there should be a good balance.

Participant 3.2: But not even necessarily berries itself, maybe even just the colour of it could be there on the plates.

### **Brand experience**

**Moderator: Okay. Now, we'll move on to speak about brand experiences. According to Brakus et al. (2009, p.53), brand experience is the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." Brand experience has four different dimensions: sensory, affective, behavioural and finally intellectual. We'll examine each of these dimensions through the experience at Berries & Bite Brunch. I'll explain briefly the meanings of the dimensions in the beginning of each section.**

### **Sensory dimension**

**Moderator: Let's start with the sensory dimension. Sensory experiences are primarily focusing on customers' visual, auditory, smell, taste, and touch perceptions. Hence, it includes the activation of senses via brand exposure. So, does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch engage your senses? How so?**

Participant 3.3: Visually, it engaged me. As I said, it could have been more creative, but still there was an interior design with colours, an aesthetic menu and also the plates. As for the taste, I think the food was delicious. For hearing, I think the noise was a bit too loud of other people. We could barely hear each other so it was a bit irritating. For the smelling and touching, I wouldn't say those senses were engaged.

Participant 3.2: I think the restaurant didn't really actively engage my senses. As for the sight and taste yes, but I wouldn't say that it was a sensory rich experience.

Participant 3.4: Yes same for me. For me the noise didn't bother me that much, I think it would have been worse if there's no background noise at all. It gives a bit of vibe to the place.

Participant 3.1: I agree. The tasting, seeing, and hearing was there, but the others weren't.

Participant 3.5: For me too.

**Moderator: Can you explain how the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch influences your sensory experience there?**

Participant 3.3: Hm. I wouldn't think that plating influenced my sensory experience. I didn't have this plus experience. Otherwise, just generally speaking, I think plating can enhance sensory experience a lot.

Participant 3.2: Yes, not necessarily in Berries & Bite Brunch I agree with that, but otherwise even with textures, like more crunchy ingredients you can already engage more senses.

Participant 3.1: Yes, I join the others. Although the plate did engage my sight, I wouldn't say really actively. But plating is crucial for a sensory experience that we can all agree on.

### **Affective dimension**

**Moderator: Now, we continue on with the affective dimension. Affective experiences include all of the feelings, emotions and moods sparked by interacting with brands. In simple terms, it captures the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand. When dining at Berries & Bite Brunch, what kinds of emotions did you experience? Did it evoke any kind of feelings?**

Participant 3.3: Well, not necessarily. To be honest, I didn't really feel welcome at the restaurant by the staff, but it could have been as the restaurant was super busy.

Participant 3.4: For me, the experience was pleasant. I felt good in there, I had fun and had delicious food. I was content at the end.

Participant 3.1: I was really excited for the food to come. And also of course for the coffee.

Participant 3.5: Yes, that's true! I also felt excitement when I was going through the menu.

Participant 3.2: Yes, true! I liked the selection of food so that was exciting to pick one.

**Moderator: In what ways, if any, does the food presentation at Berries & Bite Brunch affect your emotional connection with the brand?**

Participant 3.2: I wouldn't say I felt closer to the brand, as this plate can be found in most of the brunch restaurants, so I also couldn't have an emotional bond, as it was not necessarily specific to only Berries & Bite Brunch.

Participant 3.3: Yes, I have the same feeling.

Participant 3.1: Me too.

Participant 3.4: I would say, I had a better feeling towards the brand as I saw they paid attention on the details of the plates. That's a good point for me.

Participant 3.5: Yes, I agree with that. Nice plates show quality, so more positive feelings towards the brand. But I also agree with the others, that I didn't feel a deep connection as it was not that special.

### **Behavioural dimension**

**Moderator: Let's continue with the behavioural dimension. Behavioural experiences can encourage certain physical acts, behaviours, and lifestyles after interacting with a brand. So, what do you think, how did you interact with Berries & Bite Brunch during your visit? For example, did you take photos of your meal, consider writing a review, or discuss your dining experience with others?**

Participant 3.1: I actually took pictures and also shared it on Instagram.

Participant 3.2: I was reading the benefits of berries on the wall, I didn't know they are so healthy. So, I think I will try to eat more in the future.

Participant 3.3: I think I would share the experience with my partner and friends.

Participant 3.5: Yes, I would also talk about it with my friends, but to write a review I don't think so. To be honest, a restaurant needs to be either exceptional, or really bad for me to write a review.

Participant 3.4: Yes, I'm the same in that, a bit lazy with reviews, although I always read and appreciate them from others.

**Moderator: Do you think that the presentation of the food at Berries & Bite Brunch might have influenced your behaviours during the visit (e.g.: taking picture, writing review, revisiting the restaurant etc.)?**

Participant 3.5: Actually, I thought about recreating the plates at home. As I said before, sometimes I do brunch at home, and I think it could be doable!

Participant 3.3: Ah that's a good point. I also thought about doing my plate at home.

Participant 3.4: Yes, that also came to my mind! I want to do the eggs Benedict. It's not an everyday thing, so I think it could even be for guests.

Participant 3.1: I actually made pictures only from the plates, so that 'behaviour' was evoked by them.

### **Intellectual dimension**

**Moderator: And finally, the intellectual dimension. Intellectual experiences involve creative and analytical thinking, as well as curiosity enhanced by interactions with a brand. Does dining at Berries & Bite Brunch pique your curiosity or provoke thought?**

Participant 3.2: Hm. As I said, I was reading about berries on the wall, so that actually made me think about all the health benefits.

Participant 3.5: It actually made me think about how I could recreate the plate. I was thinking about the ingredients, how they fit together, what else could be added to make it even better and more special. So, it evoked a bit of curiosity of me.

Participant 3.4: To be honest, I wouldn't say that any restaurant can really provoke thoughts. Maybe creativity in terms of the ingredients and how the food is prepared, but that's it.

Participant 3.3: I don't agree with this. I think restaurants actually can. Maybe not necessarily here today, but how ingredients are combined and prepared that all needs thinking, and personally, I always think through the process how the plate could have been done.

Participant 3.1: Yes, restaurants can actually make you think about food in a more innovative way.

**Moderator: Can you describe if the plating of food at Berries & Bite Brunch might contribute to this intellectual engagement? If yes, how?**

Participant 3.5: Well, I think as I said before. Regarding the recreation of the plate, it also made me think about the colours that could be used, the arrangement of the plate, the textures etc.

Participant 3.2: I think not necessarily with Berries & Bite Brunch. But I also never really experienced it before with other restaurants to be honest.

Participant 3.4: I think, we have to look a bit in different directions, for example fine dining or molecular gastronomy. Well, those for sure, can engage you in an intellectual way.

Participant 3.3: Ah yes that's true! But that's a whole different scenario.

### **Conclusion**

**Moderator: We arrived at the end of the focus group. Overall, what do you think, does plating have big importance when it comes to restaurants, can it improve the overall brand experience and opinion about a brand?**

Participant 3.2: As I said before, plating is crucial for me. I pay for a whole experience in a restaurant. So nice plating really evokes positive feelings about the brand. However, I think as we experienced today, nowadays it became a must, so a lot of people are looking for more unique and special plating to add value to the dining experience. I think most of the brunch restaurants follow the same patterns, and this restaurant didn't give a plus. So to be engaged with all these dimensions of brand experience, I think a bit more is needed.

Participant 3.3: Yes, I completely agree with that. However, I would also say, that to run a good restaurant business, and have a good brand image, much more is needed than aesthetic plating. It is the combination of everything, including also the flavours, interior design, the staff, etc. So, to form an overall opinion of a restaurant brand, I look at various elements.

Participant 3.4: Completely agree. I think I would also give more to the flavours than the looks.

Participant 3.1: I think plating is crucial for new potential guests as a first impression. As I said before, looking up restaurants online, the plates can really capture someone's attention and could be a deciding factor. However, in order to get loyal customers for a brand, you need to give more than just an aesthetic plate.

Participant 3.5: Exactly. I would be loyal to a restaurant brand if they also take good care of their customers, so have a nice staff, delicious food of course, and overall, a good atmosphere.