

Corvinus University Budapest

SUMMARY OF THESES

Márta Merkl:

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF FOOD DESIGN
AND THE ROLE OF INTERACTION AND THEME (CONCEPT)
IN DINING EXPERIENCE DESIGN WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE
CONTEXT OF FINE DINING

dissertation

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Doctoral School of Business and Management

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Supervisors:

Attila Cosovan DLA

&

Dóra Horváth PhD

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Serving your Starter... 1. Research Background, Topic Relevance, and a Brief Introduction of the Concept of Food Design

The central importance of **the concept of food** is indicated by its etymology, as the Hungarian word “étel” (food) originates from the word “élet” (life) (Zaicz, 2006). This significance is further illuminated by social science and design approaches (Steel, 2021; Zampollo, 2017).

According to Moholy-Nagy (1947:42), “**designing** is not a profession but an attitude” which permeates every aspect of life, citing examples of designing not only within the realms of the material but the immaterial as well, such as “emotional experiences”. According to Papanek (1971), everyone is a designer, since design is a human action striving to create a kind of order. In a sense, we are all food designers, since we transform ingredients – through cleaning, chopping, cooking, baking, mixing, serving, etc. – in our own kitchens on a daily basis (Hablesreiter et al., 2019).

Upon hearing the phrase “**food design**”, many would mistakenly associate it with food compositions and their photos, however, food design is a complex activity, which is not restricted to decoration. Another common mistake is to consider food design a discipline focused solely on food. In order to provide a correct interpretation of the food design concept, I present below the definition attempts, beginnings, name variations, grouping opportunities, and defining attitudes.

To give my own definition of food design, food design can be understood as a design—namely a human action aiming to establish a certain order—which is related to food in any possible way. According to Zampollo (2016), food design, beyond design activities related to food and drink (Food Product Design és Design with Food sub-disciplines), it also includes design activities related to food and drink and the establishment of eating locations (Food Space Design), settings (Eating Design), accessories (Design for Food), services (Food Service Design), and complex systems (Food System Design).

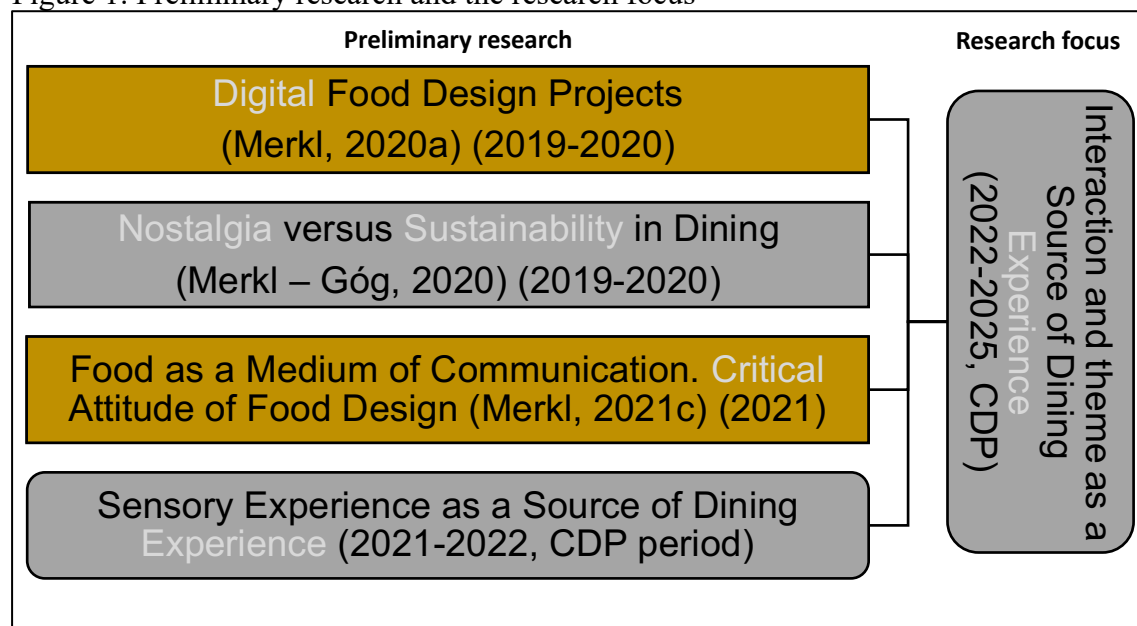
In the **art world**, the practice of certain creators, which can be categorised as food design, existed prior to the term itself. The appearance of this terminology is dated to 1999 by some sources and to 2001 by others (Zampollo, 2024).

In the **academic sphere**, the topic of food design is addressed through scientific conferences (since 2010), doctoral dissertations (since 2016), training at various educational levels, and a specific academic journal (also since 2016). In the context of social studies, food design can be interpreted through an interdisciplinary approach. This is exemplified by the comparison of marketing and design proposed by Henseler and Guerreiro (2020): While marketing focuses on understanding and predicting market processes, design seeks to identify needs and possibilities and explore new solutions through design processes.

The reference system of food design is broader than we imagine, affecting our everyday life, art and science – this underlines the (eternal) relevance of the subject and is the **reason for choice of topic**.

Critical nature, sustainability (environmental, economic, health and social dimensions), nostalgia, digitalization, and experience orientation are attitudes, which determine the food design (Erdmann et al., 2023) Proceeding along these **attitudes, preliminary research** (Figure 1) led to the final research focus of this dissertation, which examines the role of interaction and – in the context of Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) experience economy theory – the theme (concept) in the dining experience.

Figure 1: Preliminary research and the research focus



Source: The Author

Thanks to the scholarship program called the **Cooperative Doctoral Program (CDP)** and the corporate expert **Anna Niszkács**, the work was conducted in collaboration with the **Onyx fine dining restaurant** in Budapest and focused on certain aspects of designing the dining experience. The restaurant, which was awarded two Michelin stars in 2018, underwent a significant **transformation** during the research period (2020–2023). This process resulted in the establishment of the Onyx Műhely restaurant in 2021, which served as the research field, and subsequently Onyx Budapest in 2024. The renewed restaurant is characterized by a progressive fine dining approach, a commitment to sustainability, and an operation based on community (the so-called Onyx Creative Community), in which design plays a role at multiple points. During the research period, the “Metamorphosis” menu, which generally thematized the transformation, and the “Metropolis” menu, which focused on urban travel, were available at Onyx Műhely.

The dissertation was enriched by information and experience gained during study visits.

Serving your Main Course... 2. Applied Research Methods: Secondary and Primary Research

Food design is one of the main pillars of secondary research (see preview chapter)—accompanied by designcommunication and due to the research field by fine dining—, while **experience being another one**, especially the relevant literature of the experience economy as the main theoretical framework.

In the dissertation, I describe various approaches to experience and hospitality experience from multiple perspectives, including the theory of the Experience Economy, its antecedents (Schulze, 1992; Toffler, 1971), new perspectives, and its possible interpretations within the context of gastronomy (e.g., Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2022). **Briefly summarizing the experience economy theory**, Pine and Gilmore (1998; 1999; 2011) attributed significant economic importance to experience and made suggestions for staging experiences—or, in other words, experience design—and distinguished experience dimensions (types) in their 4E model,

of which education and escapism, which require guest activity, are relevant to the present research. Their highly influential theory (Ferreira – Teixeira, 2013) regarding guest activity, i.e., interaction, has been supplemented by further researchers (e.g., Boswijk et al., 2007; Caru – Cova, 2007).

From the aspect of experience management, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the **individual participating in the experience**. Spence and Youssef (2018) illustrate the relation between the service provider and the consumer sides of experience in the following way: “Deliciousness may well depend on the formulation of the food (that is the food science part) but ultimately it is a matter of perception.” (Spence – Youssef, 2018, p. 37.) According to this, it is not sufficient to examine only the intentions of the dining experience creator—regardless of being a representative of social sciences, design, or natural sciences—the perception of the dining individual must be included in the analysis as well. While some works emphasized the difference in the act of experiencing per individual (Pine – Gilmore, 1998; O’Dell, 2005), Csíkszentmihályi (1997) asserts that his subjects provided a very similar description of optimal experience or flow regardless of sociodemographic factors or culture. Csíkszentmihályi (1997)’s theory, which describes the characteristics and requisite conditions of experiencing, contributed to the methodological considerations and the interpretation of the results of the doctoral research.

The theory and practice of **designcommunication**, with a central focus on the role of creating a connection by design, served as important contributions to my research (Cosovan et al., 2018). According to my research inspiration, the act of fine dining in a restaurant has a significant potential for establishing contact by guest with the theme (concept) of the offering, the physical environment, the employees of the service provider, and others guest.

Therefore, in the **primary research**, I sought the answer to the **main question: What is the role of theme (concept) and interaction in the fine dining experience**. The **research sub-questions** are summarized in Table 1 based on the “role” of restaurant dining and the research angles.

The reason behind chosen **qualitative research** is that experience—which, according to the secondary research, arises subjectively in guests due to external factors, the personal factor as well (O’Dell, 2005)—is not necessarily quantifiable and generalizable, therefore, a qualitative

rather than the quantitative approach appears to be more suitable for its study (Neulinger – Mitev; 2017), a conclusion further supported by the preliminary research on sensory stimuli. To support the interpretation, we employed triangulation—data, researcher, theoretical, and methodological (Denzin, 2017)—as well as a subjectivity audit for the purpose of objectivity (Gall et al., 1996).

Table 1: Structured Presentation of the Research Sub-Questions

<i>“Role”</i>	<i>Work Group for Designing Food and Food items</i>	<i>Service Staff</i>	<i>Guest</i>
<i>Angles</i>			
<i>Theme (Concept)</i>	1.1. How do chefs and the food designer (work group members for designing food and food items) view the role of theme (concept) in the fine dining experience?	2.1. How do service staff view the role of theme (concept) in the fine dining experience?	3.1. How does the guest view the role of theme (concept) in the fine dining experience?
<i>Interaction</i>	1.2. How do chefs and the food designer (work group members for designing food and food items) view the role of interaction in the fine dining experience?	2.2. How do service staff view the role of interaction in the fine dining experience?	3.2. How does the guest view the role of interaction in the fine dining experience?

Source: The Author

The provider side was examined through **in-depth interviews** and **ethnography** conducted with work group members for designing food and food items (chef, food designer) and the servers. The consumer side was investigated via **focus groups** and subsequent **follow-up interviews**, as well as ethnography. Ethnographic research was conducted during the sessions dedicated to designing the conceptual menu (i.e., a tasting menu organized around a specific concept), and during dining events. The choice of ethnography and the in-depth interview method was due to the long time spent in the field made possible by the CDP, while the focus groups and follow-up interviews resulted from the spatial arrangement of the restaurant, which is built around a communal table.

I addressed the **dilemmas** arising from the chosen **methodologies** in the dissertation, particularly those:

- related to the examination of narratives (especially Horváth – Mitev, 2015; László, 2005),
- concerning control and generalizability, linked to the case study nature of the research (especially Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994),
- resulting from the observer status during the ethnography (especially Babbie, 2003; Hováth – Mitev, 2012).

During ethnography research, my **observer status** changed in: I tried the participant and the outsider statuses as well. The experiences indicated that the outsider position provides only a limited access to the studied phenomenon and the understanding of the fine dining experience, therefore, it is advisable for the researcher to interact with the observed. My participant status entailed minor service provider roles, such as hostess, food server, narrator. In the ethnographic research, the contributions of managers, servers, as well as chefs and food designers (i.e., the so-called work group members for designing food and food items) on the provider side proved crucial (fifteen subjects). Applying a mixed sampling technique (Miles – Huberman, 1994), five members of the work group for designing food and food items, along with four servers, were involved in the expert in-depth interview research. The focus group research took place on March 28, 2023, in a realistic setting: specifically, around the sixteen-seat **communal table** of the restaurant during dinners offering the food and wine (or juice) pairings of the “Metropolis” menu. The design of the focus groups was determined by methodological recommendations and the specific features of the restaurant. A screening questionnaire, which also included a projective technique, was used to select the thirty participants from eight hundred and forty-one applicants. Following the focus groups, follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with six subjects, including a photo-interview component, as I observed during the ethnographic research that photographing is part of the guests' dining norms.

Serving your Dessert... 3. Dissertation Outcomes: Academic Contributions and Managerial Implications

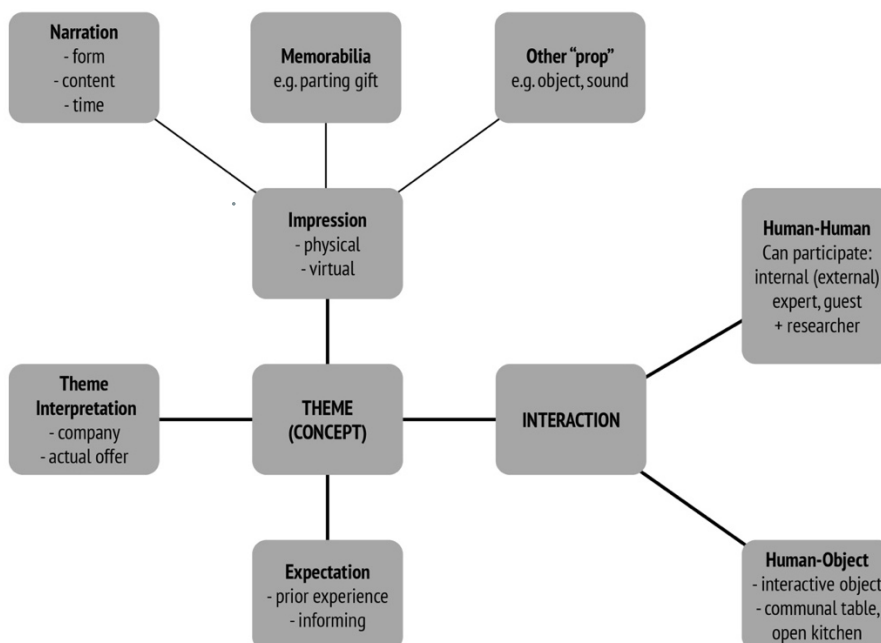
This chapter presents the research findings in relation to their academic contributions and practical utilization.

As outcome of the research, theoretical contributions were achieved at several points:

- This work remedies significant gaps in the Hungarian-language literature of food design, takes a position on its classification and most important attitudes, thereby structuring it into a system.
- It extends existing theoretical frameworks—which we indicated throughout the text—including the components of sustainable food consumption by Erdmann et al. (2003), the depiction of the 4E model by Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Bodnár (2019), and Bodnár’s (2019) study of the 4E experience in relation to the company-driven, co-created and customer-driven experience creation, following the logic of Caru and Cova (2007).
- It establishes the thought horizon of designcommunication in the context of food following Cosovan and Horváth (2016) and Galla et al. (2024).

Figure 7 summarizes the findings which structure is presented as a mind map, and it does not depict processes.

Figure 2: Presentation of Results



Source: The Author

Main results and conclusions of the primary research:

- The interpretation of the theme (concept) is dual: it can relate to the company and the actual offering, and broader and narrower interpretations of theme (concept) should be aligned. Furthermore, the individual recipient's interpretation of the theme (concept) is also observable.
- Experience was part of the broader interpretation of theme (concept) of the partner company. Some experts see the primacy of the food and drink offerings over other experience elements—designed through interaction and *theme* (concept)—, while others favor a coordinate relationship between the two. Based on the knowledge gained during the research, in classic fine dining, although the guest undoubtedly plays a prominent role, the main role is still more that of the chef and the dishes created by him. In the case of a progressive realization of fine dining, the main role may belong to the guest and their connection to the offerings, which can be supported by other experience elements. This approach is also driven by existing demand on the guest side.
- The guest's expectation contributes to the reception of the experience (e.g., previous restaurant experiences, health condition, food preferences), therefore prior informing is essential.
- Impressions reinforcing the theme (concept) include (1) narration, (2) memorabilia, and (3) other “props” (e.g., objects, sounds). Verbal narration is primarily a service staff task, even in case of an open kitchen. Designing the narration is a challenge, considering the time, the quantity of information, and the differing information needs of the recipients. The climax of the tasting menu's dramaturgy can be determined not only by the raw material, but also by interaction
- The dining experience can be catalyzed by both the physical environment (e.g., communal table, open kitchen, interactive objects engaging the guest) and human connection (e.g., interaction between guest and experts, or between guest).
- Health concerns regarding strangers dining at a communal table proved to be more pronounced (e.g., during the pandemic) than cultural norms.
- For dining around a communal table or counter to be an experience, two things are necessary: first, compatible expectations on the part of the guests (occasion, attitude), which can be aided by service provider information, and second, interactive tasks designed by the service provider or even a moderator.

- Experiences of education and escapism were mentioned in connection with both the guest experience and the professionals' work in the restaurant based on interaction. Some guests reported community experiences and felt the service staff were part of the community, a similar finding, however, did not emerge on the service provider side, although interaction with the guest became more valued for the service provider during the pandemic restrictions. The service provider's work experience facilitates their ability to act in favor of the guest experience.
- A conclusion extending beyond the primary research question, but linked to the secondary research, concerns the importance of educational initiatives on the potential of food design. This is evidenced by the collected data, which indicates that the interpretation of food design among non-design actors is limited to mere decoration.

Managerial implications...

- ... regarding food and drink offering and other experience elements:
 Besides the food and drink offering, other experience elements can contribute to the development of a progressive fine dining experience, resulting in a memorable guest experience derived from the theme (concept) and best practices of interaction.
- ...regarding interaction:
 - Interaction may reduce the intimacy of certain dining occasions (e.g., romantic or business-oriented) but can simultaneously enhance the overall experience and provide opportunities for solo diners to connect.
 - In some cases, guests not only want to meet the service provider but also wish to co-create with them.
 - Hospitality businesses that choose the communal table concept can facilitate the experience of connection by designing interactive (engaging) tasks, but group dynamics must be considered, which narration and/or moderation can potentially support.
- ...regarding theme (concept), including sustainability:
 - Emphasis should be placed on articulating the main elements of the theme (concept) (e.g., preparing staff for optimal narration implementation),

particularly during a concept change, as this can determine guest expectations and experience.

- In the case of an environmentally or socially sustainable business, it may be possible to partially deviate from the framework set by sustainability for the sake of the theme (concept), but it is better to harmonize the narrower and broader interpretations of the theme (concept), deciding, if necessary, on solutions that comply with all elements of the concept.
- For a restaurant, compliance with food allergies and intolerances is important, ensuring that dining is sustainable from a health perspective, as defined by Erdmann et al. (2003).

As an outlook, food design can be implemented not only by fine dining restaurants, but other types of dining establishments as well. The proliferation of food design as a profession and as an attitude may be hindered by its lack of public recognition and awareness as well as by misconceptions, which can be counteracted by policy decisions and educational initiatives. The long-term goal is to utilize the research findings and conclusions concerning the dining experience in other contexts as well, including healthcare.

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