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Influence of Experiential Dining Spaces on Enhancing the Flavours of Culinary Experience in Carnatic Regions of India

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ABSTRACT

In the Carnatic regions of India, where the food culture and the culinary landscape are deeply ingrained in the heart and soul of its people, restaurants have always been pivotal in shaping the dining experiences of individuals worldwide. Even in the post-pandemic era, with the promotion of in-home dining through online platforms, there remain certain irrefutable advantages to dining out in restaurants, drawing consumers to these establishments. Current trends indicate that in addition to food quality and pricing, today's customers also expect restaurants to address their social needs by providing experiential socialization. Consequently, the design of such experiential dining spaces has become a prerequisite for transforming commercial spaces into a sought-after commodity for consumers. This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining data from literature reviews, case studies, and a questionnaire survey to explore the interior design elements that enhance the diner's experience, with a specific focus on heritage-themed restaurants and the factors responsible for elevating the overall culinary experience, particularly in the Carnatic regions of India. The study proposes a conceptual model that defines 3 attributes of restaurant interiors (Spatial Cognition, Spatial Appreciation and Spatial Ambience) as the major antecedents affecting User experience within a Heritage-themed restaurant. The model is further validated based on the data collected through a questionnaire survey using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Theoretical possibilities are also briefly discussed.

1. Introduction

Food plays a pivotal role in defining the identity of individuals on physiological, biological, psychological, and social levels (Fischler, 1988) and can therefore be regarded as an extension of their self (Harris, Lyon, and McLaughlin, 2005). Most people tend to link their emotions, memories, and cultural identities to certain foods. Therefore, food and the resultant dining experience can be regarded as a testimonial to one's self-expression. Restaurants are built environments that serve as culinary

destinations for different user groups. They are distinguished particularly as a business where people sit down and experience food through sensory attributes.

Social interaction is one of the most basic and inherent motivations steering human needs. (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In today's world, the idea of developing experiential dining spaces has piqued the interest of restaurants to attract consumers seeking exciting & extraordinary spaces to fulfil their socializing needs. (Scott, Laws, & Boksberger, 2009). For a restaurant to be perceived as an entity for promoting experiential socialization, multiple design paradigms like spatial configuration, furniture, colour palette, materials, theme etc. come into play simultaneously. (Obeidat, Rumman & Al-Jubouri, 2022) In the case of heritage–themed restaurants, an atmosphere of warmth & authenticity is achieved through interior design attributes like colours, materials, lighting, artefacts & décor elements etc. as well as other stimuli related to the culture of the cuisine being served. (Ebster, Guist, 2005)

Especially in a country like India, consumers crave hedonistic experiences and tend to seek out restaurants to satiate their socio-experiential cravings apart from the food itself (TOI Infographics, 2019). According to Dine-out an upcoming tech platform in India, in a post-pandemic world, with the existence of a plethora of online food delivery options, over 45 million Indians still choose to experience dining out in restaurants. This proves that people seek experiences associated with socialization apart from the food itself to fulfil their culinary journeys.

The Carnatic region is the South Indian region that lies in between the Western Ghats and the Bay of Bengal and includes parts of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala & Andhra Pradesh. Known for their eclectic food heritage & culture, people belonging to the Carnatic regions of India take pride in their diverse culinary repertoire. (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2013). Over the years, the restaurant industry in this region has been booming with the arrival of numerous fresh-concept restaurants that attempt to capture the local food culture, heritage values and accentuate the culinary experience of the users.

Although restaurant atmospherics has been a well-researched domain, the importance of specific Interior design factors in restaurants that affect consumer behaviour as well as the use of functional & aesthetical values of interior design to enhance user experience, especially in the South Indian context has not been well-explored. Hence, this research aims to bridge the gap by exploring the interdependence between the built environment of a restaurant with the resultant user experience and its subsequent impact on the design process of experiential dining spaces.

2. Literature Review

In a commercial setting, atmospherics refers to the deliberate design of the built environment to produce specific effects upon the customers that eventually influence their behaviour & culminate in an experience. A restaurant's atmosphere majorly revolves around its Interior design by appealing through sensorial attributes such as look, feel, touch, smell & sound, which results in a unique experience or emotional response for the customer (Pecotić, Bazdan, Samardžija, 2014). According to Bernard Tschumi, an experience results in consequence to the space, form, function as well as the event or activity being performed. A spatial experience within any built environment can be defined as an experience within space that entails the individuals taking part in certain activities within a context. Therefore, improving the spatial experience within a space would necessarily pertain to forming stronger connections between the users, context, and activity. (Tschumi,2012)

The Mehrabian-Russell stimulus-response model (Mehrabian, Russell,1974) suggests that any organism when subjected to a stimulus within an environment would lead to an emotional response. In the case of a restaurant setting, the physical environment of the dining space with all its attributes

such as theme, layout, décor, colours etc. would instigate social, behavioral & emotional responses in the customers.

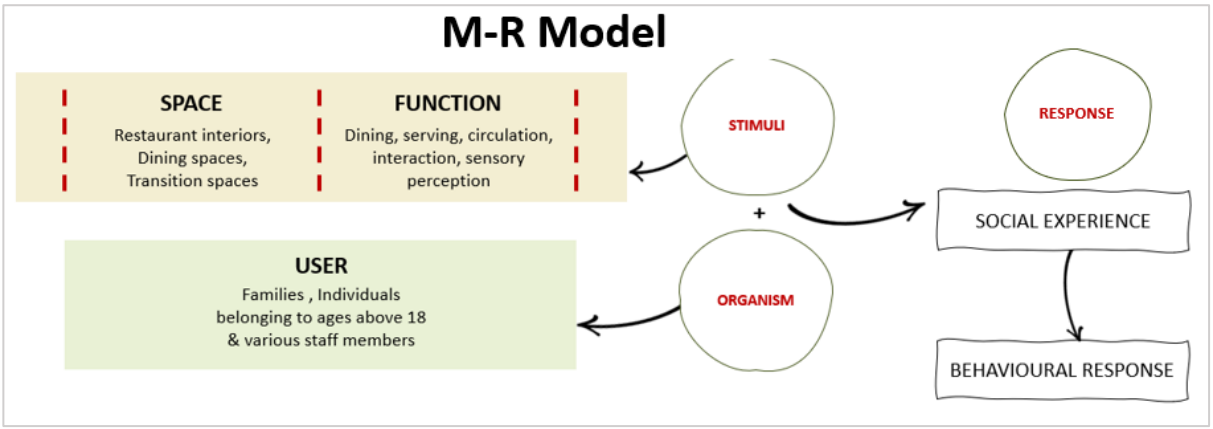


Fig. 1. Flow chart showing the application of M-R Model in restaurants

The resultant positive response from customers can be observed or measured by their willingness to stay longer, willingness to return to the restaurant and willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth as well as to pay more. (Heung, Gu, 2012)

According to the Spatial User Experience Model (Nehme, Rodríguez, Yoon, 2020), six dimensions tend to affect user experience within any built space, namely- (1) Spatial cognition, which denotes the user's ability to navigate within an environment; (2) Physical compatibility, which denotes the user's ability to interact with the physical environment; (3) Environmental compatibility, which denotes the user's perception of the environment; (4) Emotional reaction, which denotes the user's response to the environment; (5) Spatial appreciation, which denotes the user's appreciation of the physical setting and lastly (6) Proxemics, which denotes the user's perception of personal space and the impact of interpersonal relations on their experience of the environment. Therefore, taking into consideration all these six dimensions while designing experiential dining spaces in restaurants can help achieve the physical & emotional well-being of the customers.

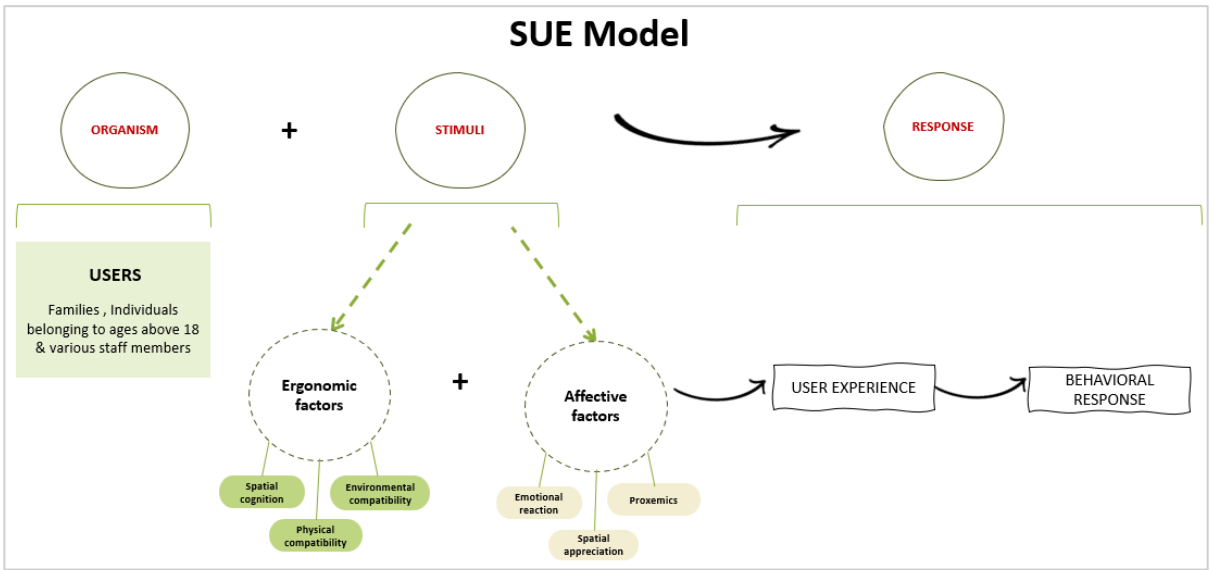


Fig. 2. Flow chart showing the application of SUE Model in restaurants

Experiential Pleasure of Food (EPF) is the long-lasting cognitive and emotional benefits that consumers receive from witnessing the multisensory, social, and cultural meanings of their culinary experience (Batat, Peter, Moscato, 2019). For a restaurant environment to achieve a satisfying & impactful dining experience in users, it must cater to three further aspects within its atmosphere – (1)

Contemplation – which denotes the user's understanding of the sensory attributes within the built space; (2) Connection – which denotes the socialization & cultural appreciation promoted within the built space & (3) Creation- which denotes the narrative, story-telling ability of the space to engage its users.

Based on the review of the mentioned literature, the following attributes of restaurant atmospherics are considered for the scope of the study: -

A. Spatial cognition – which includes the spatial layout, and wayfinding within the built space.
B. Spatial ambience - which includes the interior design elements like colours, material finishes, lighting, music, optimal temperature etc. within the built space.
C. Spatial appreciation – which includes all the elements of interior design relating to the intended theme of the built space such as décor, artefacts, menu & food presentations etc.

3. Case studies & Inferences

3.1 The Mill, Manipal, Karnataka, India

The Mill is a restaurant that has been designed by converting an abandoned rice mill to achieve a fine blend of modernity and heritage in terms of its setting, tone & ambience. It is a perfect example of how an adaptive reuse model can imbue the local heritage and enrich the customer's culinary experience through its ambience.

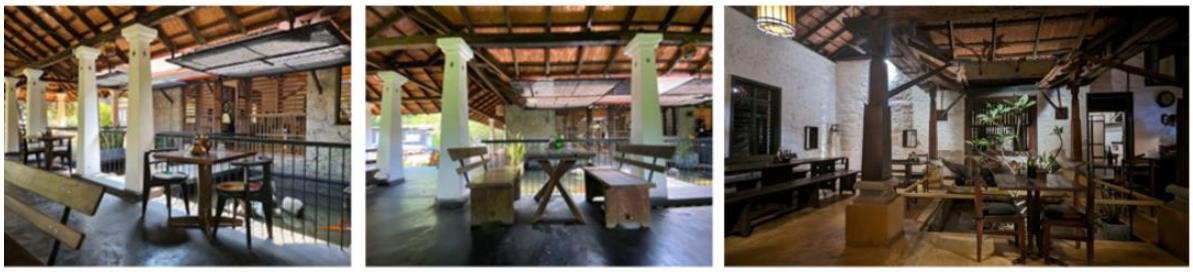


Fig. 3. Interior photographs of The Mill, Manipal.

The interiors are inspired by the traditional Guthu-mane style prevalent in Karnataka, which is further replicated in the choice of earthy hues and a rustic material palette combined with re-purposed wooden furniture to achieve a warm and cosy feel for the dining space.

Fig. 4. Interior Layout of The Mill, Manipal.

The layout transitions from a casual outdoor dining layer around the Koi ponds to a more cosy and intimate dining layer inside; thereby offering different dimensions to the dining experience to match with the occasion or social company.

Table 1
Cause-effect relationships observed in the Mill

CAUSE	EFFECT	INFERENCE
The mill focuses on a strategy to create a rustic, warm and familiar environment for the diners to immerse in.	The interiors help in crafting an enriched dining experience by establishing a cultural connection with the users, making it one of the most sought-after experiential dining options in Manipal.	Criteria like contemplation and connection have been implemented through interior design to achieve an impactful dining experience

3.2 Paati Veedu, Chennai, TamilNadu, India

Paati Veedu is an example of how to invoke a nostalgic experience for customers through its interior design and overall theme. Right from the entrance, the construction style as well as the choice of materials (with a slight modern touch) transports the customers back to their customary South Indian Grandma's house.

Fig. 5. Interior photographs of Paati Veedu, Chennai.

The interiors are inspired by the traditional Chettinad style prevalent in Tamil Nadu, which is further replicated in the choice of warm & vibrant hues combined with Up-cycled rattan seating & artefacts reminiscent of a middle-class home atmosphere.

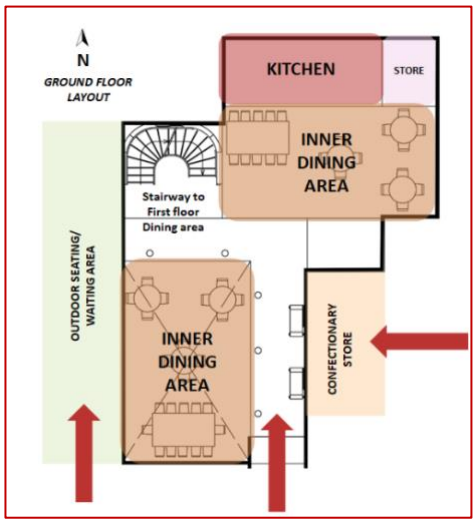


Fig. 6. Interior Layout of Paati Veedu, Chennai.

The furniture layout is distributed along the double-height courtyard set up adjacent to the stairways leading to the top floor, to accommodate families or individuals based on their social needs.

Table 2
Cause-effect relationships observed in Paati Veedu

CAUSE	EFFECT	INFERENCE
Paati Veedu aims to transport diners to their childhood memories of visiting their grandmothers' homes, explicitly evident in the restaurant's name, decor, concept, and menu.	The interiors help trigger memories and emotions related to the diner's past and provide a wholesome experience; due to this despite a higher price range & a reservation-only policy for dining, diners pour in regularly.	Criteria like creation and connection have been implemented through interior design to achieve an impactful dining experience.

3.3 Adipoli, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Adipoli is an example of how the heritage of Kerala can be translated in terms of exterior, interior and cuisine; by transporting the residents of Mumbai into a Kerala ancestral home-like setting. Right from the entrance, the construction style as well as the choice of materials transports the customers back to their ancestral homes in Kerala.

Fig. 7. Interior photographs of Adipoli, Mumbai.

Although the planning and design of the restaurant follow the concept of "Tharavad homes of Kerala", the interiors are a blend of contemporary and Kerala styles which is reflected in the choice of a delicate pastel monochromatic palette to highlight the wooden furnishings, partition, and window features of the dining space.

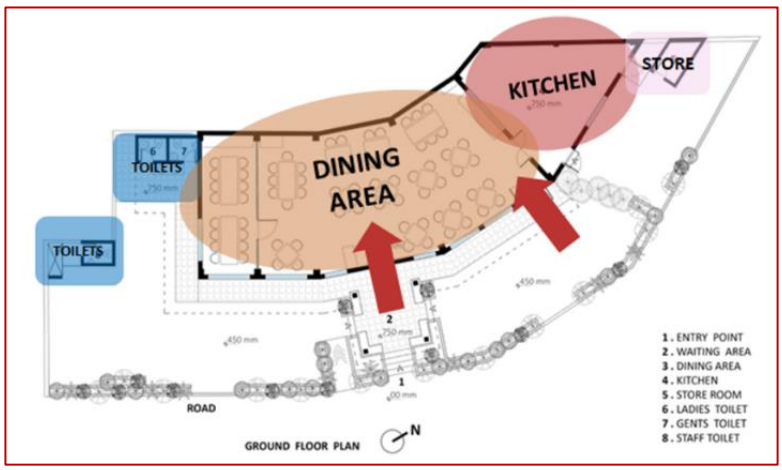


Fig. 8. Interior Layout of Adipoli, Mumbai

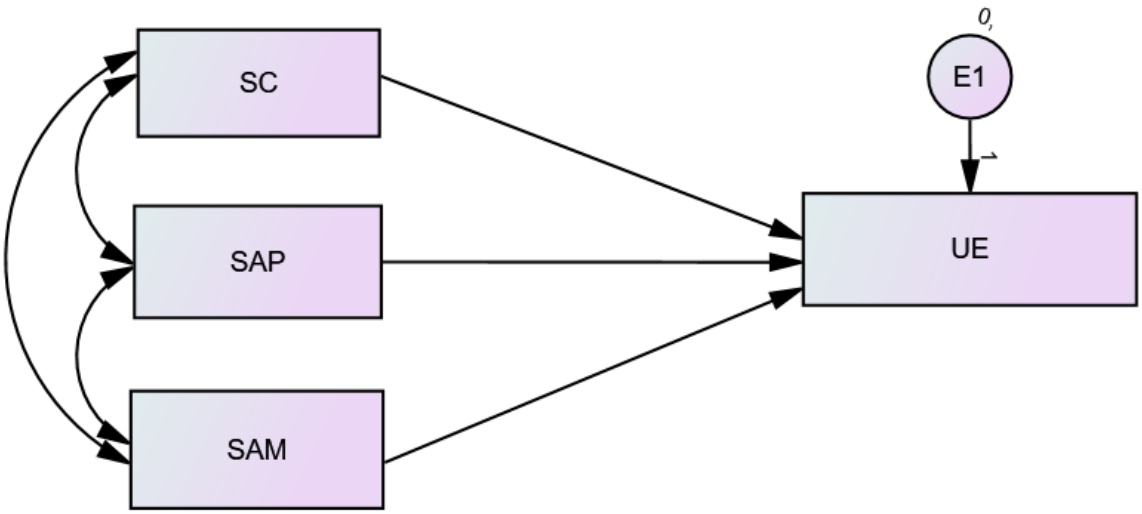
The interior layout transitions from a casual dining space to a cosy 8-seater intimate setting on the other side of a wooden partition unit.

Table 3
Cause-effect relationships observed in Adipoli

CAUSE	EFFECT	INFERENCE
Adipoli aims to create a home away from home experience for the Malayalis living in Mumbai; reflected in its planning, décor, ambience and menu.	The interiors help capture the cultural sentimentality of the diners and serve them with an experience that makes them reminisce about their cultural traditions in a modern setting.	Criteria like connection have been implemented through interior design to achieve an impactful dining experience.

3.4 Does the interiors affect user experience in heritage-themed restaurants?

Based on the understanding & interpretation of data collected through literature review & case studies, the study proposes a conceptual model (shown in Figure 10), to suggest that Interior design parameters within themed restaurants create a positive user experience for the customers. In other words, customers tend to evaluate their culinary experience within a heritage–themed restaurant based on Interior design parameters like Spatial Cognition, Spatial Ambience & Spatial Appreciation. This can be reflected in their decision to spend longer durations within the restaurant environment, pay more, revisit and recommend the establishment to their social circle etc.



SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience, E1 – Other parameters left un-considered that may/may not affect user experience.

Fig. 9. Proposed Conceptual Model Framework

The research gaps identified upon review of the literature prompted the framework of a null hypothesis (H_0) & alternate hypothesis (H_a) for the study area which is to be proved or disproved towards the end of the study-

Null Hypotheses (H_0): Interior design parameters of themed restaurants do not create a positive socio-cultural experience for customers.

Alternative Hypotheses (H_a): Interior design parameters of themed restaurants create a positive socio-cultural experience for customers.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research done over the study area is based on a "Mixed method Approach"; owing to the contrasting nature of data required to understand and analyze the cause-effect relationships between the dependent & independent variables of the topic defined as well as to meaningfully integrate the conclusions towards the end of the study.

Initially, the study area scope was defined based on a thematic literature review of all relevant journals & papers; followed by a case study of 3 heritage-themed restaurants that were chosen according to the cultural context to understand the cause-effect relationships they achieve amongst the user groups. This was then followed by an online Questionnaire survey, which could help in understanding users' data and their reasons for choosing to dine out in heritage-themed restaurants, identify the interior design attributes that enhance user experience in such restaurants and quantify the effect of these attributes on their overall experience.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Owing to the limited study period of 3 months (from August to October 2023), a convenient sample of 60 respondents belonging to the context of the study was chosen randomly from the researcher's contacts, and a 3-sectioned online questionnaire was circulated amongst them within 2 weeks. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions in total and was divided into 3 sections as follows-

1. Section 1: Contains 6 multiple-choice questions to understand users' data and their reasons for choosing to dine out in heritage-themed restaurants.
2. Section 2: Contains 10 Likert scale response-based (5-point scale) questions to identify the attributes that enhance user experience in such restaurants.
3. Section 3: Contains 5 multiple-choice questions to quantify the effect of the attributes on their overall experience.

Around 51 responses were received in total. Female respondents constituted 54.9% of the sample and most respondents belonged to the age groups of 18-30 years.

4.3 Data Analysis

A range of statistical tests were done to analyse the response data and validate the null (H_0) or alternate hypothesis (H_a) as well as the proposed conceptual framework.

1. Firstly, a descriptive statistical analysis was done (Refer to Table 4) for the independent variables (SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience) and the dependent variable (UE – User Experience) of the data set (N=51) to find their respective mean, median & mode.
2. Then the data set is tested for Normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Refer to Table 6), since the data set belongs to the N <100 (N=51) category. This is done to decide whether to further subject the data set to parametric or non-parametric testing.
3. Since the data set was not normally distributed and consisted mostly of ordinal data, it was subjected to testing by the Ordinal Regression Method (Refer to Table 7, Table 8), to validate the independent variables and understand their possible effects on the dependent variable.
4. Finally, the proposed conceptual model was tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to validate the model and arrive at conclusions for the research (Refer to Figure 11, Table 9).

5. Results and Discussions

The research done in the study area encompasses testing of the data collected from the aforementioned methods and the following results were found.

5.1 Descriptive Statistical Analyses of the Responses

Table 4
Descriptive Statistical Analysis for the variables

Descriptive Statistics for Variables													
	SC1	**SC2**	**SC3**	**SAP1**	**SAP2**	**SAP3**	**SAM1**	**SAM2**	**SAM3**	**SAM4**	**UE1**	**UE2**	**UE3**
N Valid	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51	51
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.08	4.16	3.69	4.14	3.80	4.12	4.12	3.75	4.10	3.80	3.94	4.18	4.22
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Mode	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	4
Std. Deviation	.868	.880	.990	.849	.849	.840	.816	.977	.755	.960	.732	.932	.730
Variance	.754	.775	.980	.721	.721	.706	.666	.954	.570	.921	.536	.868	.533
Skewness	-.537	-1.051	-.479	-1.292	626	-1.283	-.453	-.261	-.456	-.861	543	-1.293	-.361
Std. Error of Skewness	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333	.333
Kurtosis	-.573	1.613	-.168	2.791	1.116	2.887	-.707	-.901	-.203	1.191	.575	1.847	-1.020
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656	.656

SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience

The five-point Likert scale is referred to as an interval scale & the mean is said to be crucial to validate the parameters/variables being tested for all Likert-scale-based responses (Pimentel,2010). Each response has values that belong within the interval mentioned in Table 5 shown below.

Table 5
Typical Likert Scale values for the responses

Likert Scale	Interval	Description
1	1 - 1.8	Strongly Disagree
2	1.8 – 2.6	Disagree
3	2.6 – 3.4	Neutral
4	3.4 - 4.2	Agree
5	4.2 - 5	Strongly Agree

Since all the values of the mean (Table 4) lie above the 3.4 limit, it can be understood that the respondents validate the influence of all the 3 independent variables SC, SAP & SAM in assessing their overall culinary experience within heritage-themed restaurants. The standard deviations of the variables lie between the range of 0.73 to 0.99, which indicates the consistency of rating by the respondents. Also, lower values of variance suggest the homogeneity in the responses received for the variables SC, SAP & SAM.

5.2 Test for Normality of Data Set

Since all the values of significance (shown in Table 6) existed below 0.05, the data set was not normally distributed and hence had to be tested non-parametrically to further validate the variables and arrive at possible conclusions for the study area.

Table 6
Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test for the variables

Variable	Statistic	df	Significance
UE	.936	51	.008
SC	.927	51	.004
SAP	.903	51	<.001
SAM	.950	51	.032

SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience

5.3 Ordinal Regression Analysis

To investigate the possible effects of independent variables over the dependent variable, the variables were subjected to odds ratio analysis using the Ordinal Regression method. The odds ratio (Refer to Table 7) indicates that the odds of being at a higher level in UE increase by a factor of 12.091 for every 1 unit increase in SAM (Exp(B) = 12.091 > 1). Comparatively, it is indicated that there is a decreasing probability of the UE being at a higher level as the values of SC (Exp(B) = 0.652 < 1) & SAP (Exp(B) = 0.863 < 1) increase. This means that out of the 3 variables, Spatial Ambience (SA) significantly affects the User experience (UE) in themed restaurants.

Table 7
Odds Ratio Analysis of the variables for a fixed dependent variable

Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval	Wald Chi-Square	Hypothesis Test (df)	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Wald Confidence Interval for Exp(B)
(UE=2.67)	2.992	2.0582	-1.043, 7.026	2.113	1	.146	19.917	.353, 1125.100
(UE=3.00)	4.904	1.9249	1.131, 8.677	6.491	1	.011	134.837	3.100, 5865.319
(UE=3.33)	§.381	1.9408	1.577, 9.185	7.688	1	.006	217.327	4.843, 9753.378
(UE=3.67)	6.297	1.9709	2.434, 10.160	10.208	1	.001	542.933	11.405, 25846.602
(UE=4.00)	7.890	2.0765	3.820, 11.960	14.438	1	<.00	2671.013	45.616, 156398.246
(UE=4.33)	8.759	2.1459	4.553, 12.965	16.661	1	<.00[1]	6368.065	94.935, 427156.970
(UE=4.67)	10.391	2.2652	5.951, 14.831	21.043	1	<.00[1]	32571.030	384.284, 2760643.488
SC	-.428	.6324	-1. 667, .812	.458	1	.499[1]	.652	.189, 2.252
SAP	-.148	.7050	-1.530, 1.234	.044	1	.834	.863	.217, 3.435
SAM	2.492	.9057	.717, 4.268	7.574	1	.006	12.091	2.049, 71.347

SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience

To identify which of these independent variables is a positive or negative indicator of the dependent variable, their estimate values are compared (Refer to Table 8). SAM is the significant

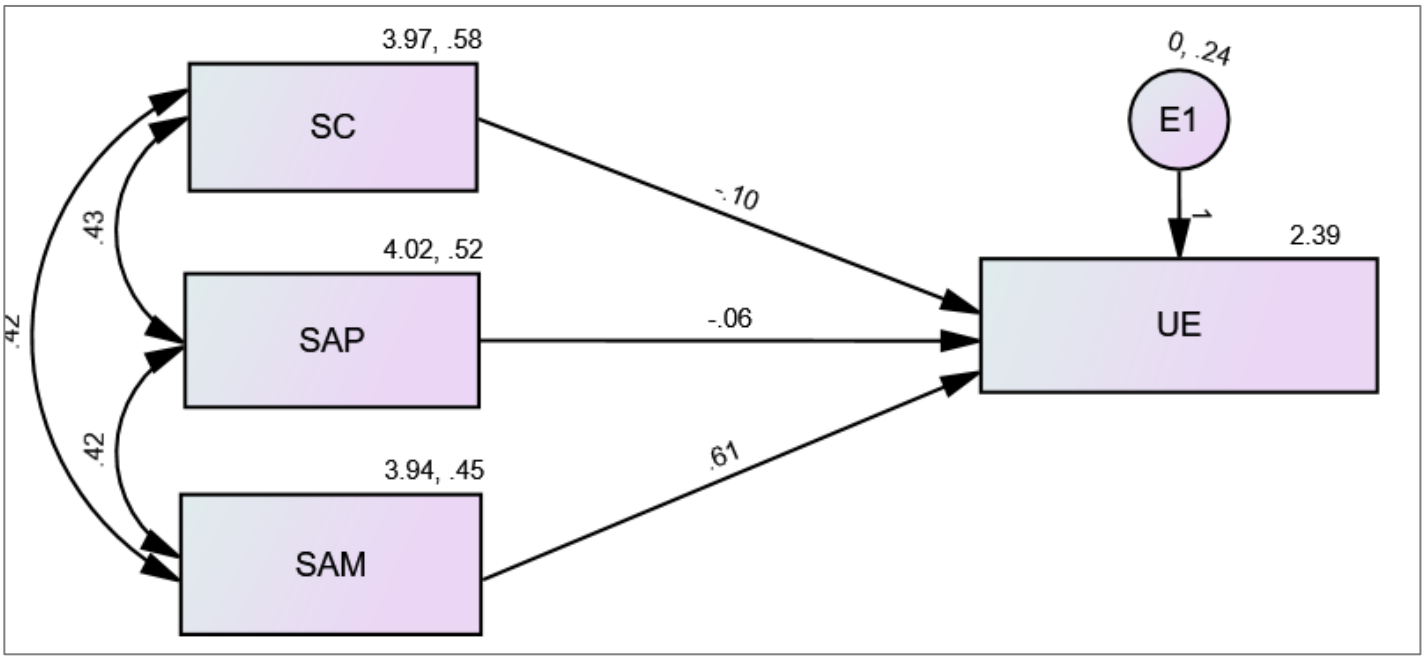
positive indicator of UE i.e., for every 1 unit increase in SAM, there is a predicted increase of 2.492 in the logarithmic odds of being at a higher level on UE.

Table 8
Estimate Values of the variables for a fixed dependent variable

	Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval
Threshol	(UE = 2.67)	2.992	1.737	2.965	1	.085	-.413, 6.396
	(UE= 3.00)	4.904	1.673	8.589	1	.003	1.624, 8.184
	(UE = 3.33)	5.381	1.685	10.202	1	.001	2.079, 8.684
	(UE = 3.67)	6.297	1.725	13.324	1	<.001	2.916, 9.678
	(UE = 4.00)	7.890	1.837	18.442	1	<.001	4.289, 11.491
	(UE= 4.33)	8.759	1.903	21.187	1	<.001	5.029, 12.489
	(UE = 4.67)	10.391	2.026	26.306	1	<.001	6.420, 14.362
Location	SC	-.428	.592	.521	1	.470	-1.589, .733
	SAP	-.148	.705	.044	1	.834	-1.530, 1.234
	SAM	2.492	.883	7.967	1	.005	.762, 4.223

SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience

5.4 Conceptual Model Testing



SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience, E1 – Other parameters left un-considered that may/may not affect user experience

Fig. 10. SEM for Conceptual Model & Hypotheses Testing

Table 9
Regression weight estimates for the variables

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P label
UE <--- SC	-.103	.162	-.636	.524
UE <--- SAP	-.062	.193	-.323	.747
UE <--- SAM	.605	.226	2.676	.007

SC – Spatial cognition, SAP – Spatial Appreciation, SAM – Spatial Ambience, UE – User Experience

A Structural Equation Model (SEM) was estimated using SPSS-AMOS and the results are indicated in Table 9. The results validate an acceptable fit of the proposed model since the S^2 values of all the variables are >1.
Among the 3 independent variables, SAM (independent variable) is seen to have the maximum impact on the resultant UE (dependent variable). This is because $p=0.007<0.05$ for SAM, which implies significant estimates for the variable.

The previous test results indicate that the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, which means the data supports the alternative hypothesis (H_a). There is a positive user experience created by the Interior design parameters discussed in the study area. Among the 3 independent variables, Spatial ambience (SAM) is observed to have more impact in achieving a positive socio-cultural experience among the customers within a heritage-themed restaurant setting.

Furthermore, the respondents of the study as well as the data analysed from the thematic analysis of the case studies firmly suggest that the intent of approaching the ambience design of Heritage-themed restaurants by incorporating the 3C's, namely – Creation, Connection & Contemplation; helps attain a positive and welcoming indoor environment that is mindful of the user's socio-cultural domicile and encourages them to reciprocate their patronage which is seen in their choices to linger longer in the dining area, make larger purchases, come back, and refer friends and family to the restaurant, among other actions.

6. Conclusions

This study offers a conceptualization of the parameters of heritage-themed restaurant interiors that entail social, emotional, behavioural & memory-laden responses among the users, culminating in a holistic culinary experience. It revalidates the pre-existing theoretical models like the M-R Model and SUE Model and establishes the importance of various interior design parameters in affecting user experience within heritage-themed restaurants. Furthermore, the context-based case studies undertaken, help in understanding the various cause-effect strategies that can be implemented while designing heritage-themed restaurants to create an impactful culinary experience for the users. The study results have clearly indicated that Spatial ambience plays a major positive role in enhancing the user experience. Therefore, the design elements associated with spatial ambience such as the choice of colours, material finishes, lighting, etc. must be given more consideration and highlighted as the tangible attributes of the local cultural context that instigate a behavioural/emotional response in the customer and thereby create an impactful culinary experience.

There are certain limitations to the study that may leave room for future research. Only the context of Carnatic states and heritage-themed restaurants emphasising the experience–related parameters have been considered in the current research. Therefore, further research may be required to broaden the interpretational and generalisation of the proposed conceptual model to different restaurant categories as well as socio-cultural contexts. Apart from the interior design parameters, several other

factors like service quality, food variety & taste, cost etc. could also significantly contribute to the user experience and therefore additional research can be done to understand the relationship between all these factors in motivating customer satisfaction and the resultant experiential socialisation within a restaurant setting.

Acknowledgement

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