

Research Article

Material management in themed restaurants: Inspiring the experience economy

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Abstract

In tune with wider ideas of an experience economy, the hospitality industry has increasingly focused less on giving a service to its customers and more on offering them memorable, sensory experiences. This paper looks at one facet of this provision of experiences: the material engineering and management of the 'affective atmosphere' or 'ambiance' of a venue. It unfolds the exploration of theme restaurants in practicing the material management as an inspiration to stage an experience. This paper illustrates its arguments through one case study: the Indonesian theming of the *Pondok Malindo* restaurant, Selangor. Practically, the findings suggest that creating the desired ambiance needs proper planning and careful attention to a wide range of material elements. More broadly, the paper suggests that accounts of the experience economy should consider the powers and agencies of materials and objects.

Keywords:

Experience economy, themed restaurant, DINESCAPE, experience, materials

1 Introduction

Since the idea of the ‘experience economy’ was introduced almost 20 years ago (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; 2013), an increasing number of hospitality business operators and policy advisors have shifted focus, away from simply providing material goods via high quality service encounters and towards the provision of memorable, sensory experiences. One commercial manifestation of this ambition has been the global proliferation of themed retail environments. According to Gilmore and Pine (2002), the use of a theme is central to the ‘staging’ or production, of experiential consumption. A theme provides an underlying concept, automatically turning a service into an experience and increasing memorability. This paper draws on my wider doctoral research on the recent proliferation of themed restaurants in the Klang Valley area of Malaysia (also referred to as the Greater Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area). Empirically, the paper focuses on one case study restaurant: the Indonesian-themed restaurant, *Pondok Malindo*. Conceptually, the paper seeks to extend Pine and Gilmore’s account of the theatrical character of the experience economy by paying sustained attention to its material staging. It brings together research within hospitality management on the ‘dinescapes’ of restaurants (Ryu & Jang, 2008) and broader thinking, particularly in the discipline of geography, material engineering and ‘affects’ of commercial environments (Thrift, 2008). Through themed restaurants, this paper navigates how academics and practitioners of experience economy should recognize the importance of materials and objects.

2 Experiences, Materials and the ‘Dinescape’

In the account of the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (1999) mobilize a theatrical metaphor: ‘work is theatre and every business a stage’. A common development of this way of thinking has been to emphasize the performative nature of labor and service encounters in the hospitality industry (Crang, 1994). Here, the performances of front line staff and customers are the center of attention. In contrast, this paper argues that we also need to explore the materiality of the stage itself as an important ‘actor’ in consumer experiences. We need, then, to foreground what might be something of a ‘background’ in our experiences of hospitality spaces: their material design and infrastructure. Writings coming from architecture – for example, Klingmann (2007) on ‘brandscaapes’ – and spatial design – notably Svabo, Larsen, Haldrup and Bærenholdt (2013)–have made important contributions in this regard. Work on themed environments has been valuable too. Influential writers such as Gottdiener (2001) traditionally approached theming through the lens of semiotics, exploring the meanings of themed spaces and the wider discourses they mobilize.

However, Beardsworth and Bryman (1999, p.36) note, ‘one of the characteristics of a themed restaurant is the narrative is made visible and tangible in the physical structure of the restaurant’s interior including artefacts, décor, logos, menu terminology and

merchandise'. Matus Ruiz (2012) recently extended this emphasis on the material media of theming in his study of Mexican restaurants in the US, Spain and the Netherlands. Developing the idea of 'affective foodscapes', Matus Ruiz argues that these restaurants engage customers not just through narratives and meanings but also via sensory experiences and material 'affects' that generate feelings. Further, Matus Ruiz draws a wider body of work in disciplines such as Geography that is interested in how places come to have 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson, 2009) and ambiances (Adey et al., 2013). Thrift (2008) argues that contemporary business increasingly engineers retail spaces and products in order to generate atmospheres that enchant consumers and stimulate their desires. Whilst the idea of an 'atmosphere' suggests the ephemeral, such writers argue that the affects which customers sense are produced through the materials of spaces, in particular through the coming together of bodies, objects, and 'less solid' materialities (such as light, air and temperature).

Ryu and Jang (2008) parallel many of these arguments in the field of hospitality management, in particular, as they develop the concept of the 'DINESCAPE' in order to identify the key elements requiring management in a restaurant. According to the researchers, DINESCAPE refers to the "man-made physical and human surroundings, not the natural environment, in the dining area of an upscale restaurant" (Ryu & Jang, 2008, p.5). They focus on six dimensions: social factors, service product, layout, facility aesthetics, ambiance, and lighting. Each of these is part of staging a themed experience.

Social factors refer to the characteristics of the staff in the restaurant, including their embodiment, uniforms and interactions with the customers. The *Service Product* represents the products or materials served to the customers. This includes not only the food and drink but also the materials presenting it: for example, the use of banana leaves as a plate in an Indian themed restaurant. Layout refers to the arrangement of objects within an environment, which impacts on how they relate and how they make customers feel. Barker and Pearce (1990), for example, emphasize that customers may feel uncomfortable if seating positions are too close to another customer. *Facility Aesthetics* refers to the impact of architectural and interior design on the qualities of the physical environment (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). The argument here is that aesthetic style involves a physical sensing of qualities (more generally, see Postrel, 2003). Colour is often crucial here, being not only one of the first things that customers notice and evaluate when entering a space but also affecting people emotionally (Eiseman, 1998). The furniture and seating can be related to the state of bodily comfort of customers.

Meanwhile, ambiance refers to the less tangible and, perhaps, more 'background' characteristics of the restaurant space, including temperature, noise, music and scent (Baker, 1987). Crucial here are the nonvisual senses, and their often-subconscious effects (Fullen, 2003). Interestingly, Ryu and Jang highlight one aspect of ambiance, lighting, as particularly important. Both Baraban and Durocher (2001) and Ryu and Han (2011) agree that lighting is the single most important element in a restaurant design,

as if got 'wrong' it can obviate the effectiveness of all other elements (more generally, on luminosity and the 'agency of light' see Bille and Sørensen, 2007).

3 Methodology

This paper draws from broader doctoral research on themed restaurants in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The wider body of data includes forty-nine themed restaurants, for twenty-one of which material documentation was supplemented by interviews with owners / managers (as appropriate). Themed restaurants have been proliferating in the Klang Valley, seen as a commercially innovative strategy through which differentiated and more memorable dining experiences can be produced. Themes include international identifiers such as Japanese, Mexican and Italian; and unique themes such as a chemistry lab and a floral themed restaurant. This study also undertook eight focus groups sessions to generate data from the customers' points of view. However, in relation to its objective, this paper focuses on just one restaurant as a case study: the Indonesian-themed *Pondok Malindo*, opened in 2013. The data was collected through photographics (focusing on themed objects and materials) and with video recording (focusing on capturing something of the ambiance and lively practice of the restaurant); and the conduct of semi-structured interviews (Dunn, 2010; Robson, 2002) with the owner and the interior designer. All materials presented had been through ethical filtrations and approvals from the owners. The analysis of these qualitative data was aided by the use of Nvivo 10 software, through which inductively developed a list of thematic codes (or 'nodes' in the Nvivo software).

4 *Pondok Malindo's* Dinescape

Pondok Malindo was launched in 2013 by DSD Groups, with a focus on providing an 'Indonesian' restaurant that was 'authentic' but also 'modern'. The name '*Malindo*' suggested some combination of the Malaysian and Indonesian. The interviews with the owner and interior designer emphasized how important the material management of the 'DINESCAPE' dimensions, which is outlined by Ryu and Jang (2008), had been in staging the experience. The designer, for example, discussed their thinking in terms layers of design, related to phases in the restaurant experience. He concluded that it is important to capture the market on their first sight, enhance the theme through how the space feels to inhabit, and then to provide the good food (which comes later, but of course is also essential):

"...when we look at the first impression...the first impression to the customers is of course the aesthetic. The social will come later, because we want to attract the customers first, right. That is the one that we want to deliver. The wow factor... So in order to draw them to our place, we have to make sure that we have the aesthetic value. When people buy that aesthetic image, then they will walk in. When they

enter, only then does the ambiance come to the stage. They take the seat, then the social starts to play a role. They will feel... 'oh, this place is so cosy'. So they feel comfortable, it's not noisy... and then they start evaluate other things like the lightings, layout... so it will be continuous. It's like peeling the rose's petals. It comes layer by layer. And lastly, when they feel the ambiance, they will taste the food..." (Pondok Malindo Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

Some of the materials managed were explicitly part of the theming, including decorative items that were selected to create the desired Indonesian environment. In discussion, it became apparent how details mattered in this regard to both owner and designer. In part, this meant thinking not only about the large-scale design issues, like the furniture, colors, and spatial arrangement of activities, but also small items such as the types of plates, the design of table cloth and so on. For example, the owner put effort into creating novel cutlery holders using bamboo, believing that this small detail mattered in creating the overall experience:

"...Yes, we get the bamboo here and find a craftsman to make this (pointing to the cutlery holder made from bamboo), to smooth the outer layer of the bamboo and then to stand as accessories in the restaurant. I got the idea from Indonesia's traditional restaurant and applied it here." (Pondok Malindo owner, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

In other cases, the matter of detail was about the precise selection of an object and its relationship to the overall theme. The correct materials and objects are important as they act as an ambassador of the theme and play their role in narrating the experience to the audience. A recurrent issue here was how the selected materials and objects signal a familiar theme and, at the same time, signal a distinctiveness to this restaurant. For example, at the designer's suggestion, the owner used paintings of the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) character to evoke Indonesian heritage, in preference to batik printed cloth:

"..... in fact, I didn't suggest putting the long batik prints cloths [on the walls] because it is a common practice [at other Indonesian themed restaurants]. So the owner hangs the painting... wayang kulit (shadow puppet) or something like that. So yes, I think that will do. Something which relates to their [Indonesian] culture. But not too heavy." (Pondok Malindo Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

In such examples, we can see how material objects acted more than a background stage, where the theatre of the restaurant experience is performed. A concrete expression of this symbolization found in *Pondok Malindo*. Figure 1 illustrates how the owners created a 'stage space' within the restaurant layout. This was designed to be

transformed for potential use in cultural performances, such as *Gamelan* music performance, but for the most part it was occupied by an array of material objects. Indonesian magazines, newspapers and a cookbook were placed there so that customers could read them while waiting for the food to be served. There are also a few cultural objects representing Indonesian heritage, such as the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) characters, small replica of palace's umbrellas, as well as traditional food and drink containers. These objects are not just props to a social performance but also have their own role in delivering the culture to the customer. They perform the experience.



Figure 1: Themed materials are not only the props but act as 'performers' in staging the experience

The materials being managed in *Pondok Malindo* were not limited to decorative objects. Colour was a particularly important material element in the design. Colour has been an exemplary focus of work on materialities that moves beyond a focus on solid objects into a more 'affective materialism' (Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Thrift, 2008). Colour, in combination with light, engages with our visual sense as a felt intensity, as well as a bearer of symbolic meaning. Certainly, colour played a significant role in creating ambiance in *Pondok Malindo*. Here, for example, the designer discusses the use of both yellow and grey on the restaurant walls:

"... In Indonesian culture, the colour that will represent the heritage of the country is keraton [yellow]. Palace keraton. So I mentioned that we have to have a bit of this element, but we didn't want to show it in a form of object... So we just applied a bit of this yellow colour to represent it. And then it will be fascinating when it is reflected with the yellow lights during the night... And we combine it with grey so that it has the modern element." (Pondok Malindo Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

Colour works in combination with lighting. Different level of brightness, the colours of the lights and the position of the lights will affect the ambiance in various ways. In *Pondok Malindo* the owner was conscious of costs and the work required to install complicated lighting, so a fairly simple lighting design was settled on, focused on achieving a cozy and romantic ambiance for diners.

“... I can’t control the dim level of the lights. It is standard. But I can choose the section that I want to turn on the lights. During the night, it will look yellowish, but the outside will be a bit dim. So it gives a romantic feeling to the customers who dine there.” (Pondok Malindo Owner, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

The combination of colour and light/dark also functions to disguise spaces or to shape the view of customers. Thus, it can be a cost-effective means to construct the space. Below, for example, the designer discusses the ceiling of the restaurant, showing how its black colour was decided through a combination of aesthetic, practical and financial considerations:

“... the ceiling... we painted it black because we wanted to cut down the cost; we didn’t want to renovate it. If you have a closer look at the ceiling, you can see all sorts of wiring up there. If we covered it using the plaster ceiling, that would be a cost to the owner. So, what we did was that we painted it black and then we lowered the light fitting so that when it is brighter at the bottom, the upper space will be darker and cover the wiring. It will illustrate the effect of infinity.” (Pondok Malindo Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

While the overall atmospherics of restaurants are composed of, and shaped by, numerous elements, some are considerably more controllable than others (Milliman, 1986). One of the ordinarily controllable elements is music and its influence on the sonic ambiance of a restaurant. Generally, music being studied in restaurants for years, and the variations ranging from loud to soft, from fast beat to slow, from heavy to light rock, from classical to contemporary urban. However, it is important to choose the right music in creating ambiance; as Fullen (2003) pointed out, properly managed background music is crucial to building the restaurant’s theme and brand. An interview with a restaurant interior designer supports this notion:

“We should consider how many speakers we want to install on the wall. The technology of the speaker must be taken seriously too. Do not opt for a cheaper one as they produce low quality of sound... another thing is the sound proofing for wall. But normally, they don’t install it for the open restaurant. Sometimes, an open restaurant installs one speaker here and one speaker over there. They just play the music at a low volume. There is no need to be loud. The place is comfortable, cozy, dining with sofa, beautiful finishing too, with romantic, dim lighting...”

but it ends with high volume music! So, is it cozy? No, it's not cozy at all.” (Pondok Malindo Interior Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

The choice of music was also matched to the restaurant theme. In *Pondok Malindo*, the owner played traditional Indonesian songs and on certain occasions, a more contemporary Indonesian music was selected. This is to show its production as an Indonesian restaurant owned by a Malaysian but with a ‘modern’ twist:

“Usually I will play the music. So the customers will relax and feel ambiance... by hearing the Javanese or gamelan music. The customers like it too, none of them asked me to change to other music. It's just me who have to alternately play the traditional and modern music. But all of them will be Indonesian music. Because I want the customers to know that this is an Indonesia themed restaurant owned by a Malaysian.” (Pondok Malindo Owner, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

Other less ‘solid’ materialities, engaging other senses, were important too. Music has been mentioned above. Temperature is vital too; as Malaysia is a hot and humid country, it is a good selling point to provide air-conditioning. Smell was also an important factor in *Pondok Malindo*. Whilst food smells were an important part of an appetizing ambiance, this atmosphere had to be carefully managed through ventilation design and spatial layout, as the designer explains:

“... Women don't like it if their clothes and scarves catch the smell of food, in contrast with men who don't bother about it. So women didn't want this to happen. Therefore, these are among the things that we have to control which is to come to a very technical issue like how to deal with the ventilation system for the air-conditioner. So we have to identify which space needs high pressure and which space requires low pressure so that the smell didn't travel to the service area. That kind of thing needs technical specification.” (Pondok Malindo Designer, Interview with Author; translated by Author)

5 Conclusion

In addressing the Hospitality and Tourism Conference (HTC) 2017 theme on ‘Celebrating Hospitality and Tourism Research: Inspire, Explore and Practice’, this paper has explored the practices of material management in inspiring the owners/managers in staging experiences within themed restaurants. Academically, this paper suggests that there is a valuable confluence between research in hospitality management on the experience economy and areas of critical thought concerned with materiality, affect and atmospherics. The analysis has used Ryu and Jang's (2008) concept of the ‘DINESCAPE’ to illustrate this confluence. The growing presence of themed restaurants in Klang Valley

is indicative of a wider need to research how the experience economy idea is being developed in various consumer cultures around the world. More specifically, this paper's arguments were twofold. Conceptually, the paper has suggested that accounts of the experience economy in general, and of hospitality spaces more specifically, needs to take seriously the 'power' of materialities to shape the experience provided. It has argued that such materialities include the more obvious and traditional forms of material culture such as architecture, decorative objects and furnishings; but also involve forms of materiality that have only recently been widely recognized as worthy of study, including light / luminosity, smell, and colour. More practically, the paper has highlighted the importance of 'material management' to commercial operators. It has suggested that the DINESCAPE dimensions of Ryu and Jang (2008) are useful in implementing a material staging of experience. Addressing these dimensions requires careful planning and design, in processes that bring together questions of marketing, aesthetics, logistics and cost.

6 About the author

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