Examining Luxury Restaurant Dining Experience towards Sustainable Reputation of the Michelin Restaurant Guide

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Abstract: The study aims to investigate the formation of customer loyalty among luxury restaurant patrons in Korea. Moreover, the study investigated how the restaurants' performance could contribute to the trust and sustainability of the Michelin restaurant guide's reputation. The study identified meal experience, brand credibility, and brand love to influence customers' revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium. The study surveyed 400 luxury restaurant patrons in Korea. The Michelin restaurant guide was used to classify fine dining restaurants. Measurement items from previously validated studies were adopted. The results of the study showed the meal experience scale satisfactorily measures service performance and leads to the formation of brand credibility. Subsequently, brand prestige and brand love significantly predicted customers' loyalty intentions. Additionally, brand credibility helps form the trust of the Michelin guide and eventually predicts the long-term reputation of the guide.

Keywords: customer loyalty; brand love; meal experience; brand credibility; luxury restaurant; Michelin-starred restaurant

1. Introduction

Luxury restaurants are considered to be in the top tier of the market, not only regarding price but also food and beverage quality, decoration, style, influence, and likely a combination of all attributes [1,2]. Researchers considered products to be luxury when the workmanship and quality are at the highest level [3]. However, this definition only takes the perspective of the product specification. Luxury was defined as "anything that is desirable and more than is necessary and ordinary" from a philosophical-sociological perspective [4] (p. 412). This broader definition is in line with how typical luxury and fine-dining restaurants are described. Luxury restaurants are known to be offering innovative menus that push beyond the customers' experiences beyond the norm [5], expensive compared to non-luxury restaurants [6], not visited regularly [7], and offered social standing as well as self-expression values when consumed [8,9] among others. These characteristics of a luxury brand or product are seemingly applicable to restaurants in which Michelin stars have been awarded. A previous research argued although a relatively small section of the general population has the privilege of experiencing Michelin-starred restaurants, the Michelin guide's impact has reached all levels of society in many cultures [2]. In Europe, the guide has been accredited in helping to foster innovations and advancements among some of the worlds' top chefs and, consequently, the entire industry [10,11]. Therefore, it would not be a surprise that restaurants listed in the guide are on the higher end of the price spectrum. In other words, these restaurants are mostly positioned in the luxury restaurant segment [8].

Despite generally commanding a higher price than other classes of restaurants, luxury restaurants have generally been growing in number and profitability [1,8]. Luxury restaurants' ability to charge premium prices has sparked interest among the academic community. As a result, the amount of research conducted to explore the influences of luxury restaurant consumption has grown [1,3,8,12–15]. Even so, most previous attempts have been either focusing on the prestige and social influences of the luxury consumption choice [3,8,16,17] or individuals' luxury consumption experiences and evaluation leading to loyal behaviors [1,13–15,18]. Among a limited amount of research on the Michelin guide, the foci have been placed on the impact the guide has on culinary innovations, economics, and the culinary industry at large [2,10,11]. No previous research was found to study restaurant performance and its impact on the guide's reputation. Yet, the relationship between the restaurant's performance and the Michelin guide's reputation is inseparable.

The present research builds on the notion that the Michelin restaurant guide serves as a reliable source of information for discerning diners. In return, the restaurants have an obligation to uphold their performance to maintain their presence on the guide. Thus, leading to questions of whether the restaurant performance enhances diners' loyalty intentions to the same restaurant, and whether the performance would also help foster the Michelin guide's reputation. Hence, in addition to the reputation of the Michelin guide, this study also measures willingness to pay a premium, and revisit intention to the same restaurant. Moreover, the study introduces a scale that has yet to be thoroughly investigated, namely, the meal experience scale by Hansen in 2014 [19]. Since the meal experience scale was introduced, it has yet to be empirically tested. Then, in our study, three additional mediators were also conceptualized to provide additional linkage between the meal experience and loyalty intentions, namely brand credibility [16,20–23], brand love [24–26], and trust in the Michelin guide [27–30].

The study then aims to comprehensively explore and examine the formation of customer loyalty among luxury restaurant patrons using the aforementioned variables. In order to achieve the aim, three study objectives have been introduced; (1) to explore the perceived service quality using the meal experience scale, (2) to test the mediating effect of brand credibility, brand love, and trust in the Michelin guide, and (3) to investigate the impact of the proposed antecedents in explaining the customers' perceived reputation of the Michelin guide, revisit intention, and willingness to pay a premium. Samples of the study would be drawn from patrons who have dined at any of the Michelin-starred restaurants in the previous six months. The Michelin restaurant guide has long been considered as the definitive arbiter in fine dining by most gastronomic experts [2,8]. Therefore, most restaurants awarded Michelin stars in the guide are on the higher end of the price spectrum. In other words, these restaurants are mostly positioned in the luxury restaurant segment [31].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meal Experience

Service quality can be regarded as the prerequisite in examining consumer behavior in any service sector [32]. Since its introduction, SERVQUAL became the industry standard when it comes to measuring service quality [32,33]. Even though SERVQUAL has been proven successful in multiple sectors of the service industry, it has seen a limited application in the restaurant industry [19,34]. For restaurants, a few refinements of SERVQUAL were developed, most notably, DINESERV [35]. The five aspects meal model (FAMM) is also an example of further scale development for the restaurant industry [36]. The FAMM's notable contribution was redefining the core element of the meal. It focused on food and beverages as the "product" of a restaurant. Another instrument measuring the dining experience was the customer meal experience model (CMEM) [37]. Nevertheless, the most recent development has been the meal experience scale [19].

The meal experience scale was a result of the combination, refinement, and discovery of existing and new dimensions. The author has formed a pool of existing items from SERVQUAL, DINESERV, and Lee and Hing's (1995) scales. Additionally, 14 new items have been added to the pool. Experts

in the field of restaurant and hospitality management reviewed the items and had concluded on a 29-item scale in six constructs. The first construct is the core product. It focused on the taste sensations, the menu design, and the staff's ability to handle the menu by providing adequate information to diners. The second construct is restaurant interior. This construct includes the following four aspects of the restaurant, furniture, close objects, remote objects, and colors. Next, the personal social meeting construct refers to the interactions between staff and customers, as well as between the staff and other customers. The fourth construct is termed company. It relates to how the staff can produce a satisfying environment for the accompanying guests at the table. The fifth construct refers to the restaurant atmosphere. This construct measures the holistic experience of the meal as a result of the first four constructs. In other words, it measures the balance between all the tangible and intangible cues in a restaurant. The last construct is the management control system. It represents things that should not be visible to the guests unless a failure occurs. For example, the cleanliness of the restrooms is not a concern to the diners unless the guests can notice a lack of hygiene [19]. At the current stage, the scale has not been tested empirically. Hence, this would be the first time the scale is tested and gives a significant theoretical contribution to the scale, particularly in the research of service quality and especially in the luxury sphere. Considering the assumption that luxury service tends to be synonymous with a higher price means that patrons may not frequently visit the restaurant [8]. Thus, the meal experience scale includes items that measure the occasion of the meal that is lacking in other scales and, therefore, should fit the context of luxury restaurants well.

2.2. Brand Credibility

Brand credibility is defined as the believability of a brand to produce or perform the goods and services that have been promised [20]. It is believed to consist of two components: trustworthiness and expertise [20,21,23]. Trustworthiness refers to the willingness that the brand can deliver what they have advertised. On the other hand, expertise reflects the ability that, in future service encounters, the brand can deliver to the expected standards [16]. Brand credibility intends to explain post-consumption behaviors. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a number of studies linking brand credibility to future response variables such as revisit intention, risk perception, and advocacy loyalty behaviors [16,20–23]. Instead of focusing on one particular service experience, brand credibility concerns itself with the longevity of the experience. Many consumers, when making purchase decisions, tend to rely on certain information cues (e.g., word-of-mouth, prior experience, etc.). Accordingly, the ability to convey to consumers that they can expect the same level of service in the future helps eliminate the need to start the search again. Thus, increasing the chance of repurchase and paying a price premium [6,38].

The formation of brand credibility is instinctively followed by previous service experiences. Taking the cue that expertise is a component of brand credibility, it is only logical to assume that if guests evaluate service quality positively, the perception that the brand possesses expertise would exist. A previous study examined coffeehouse regulars and found evidence that service utility influences brand credibility [22]. Moreover, brand credibility also takes into account consumers' responses to the different marketing stimuli and performance of the brand. Subsequently, brand credibility is found to be a crucial mediator between brand experience and customers' willingness to pay a price premium [6]. As a result, the following hypothesis has been introduced.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Meal experience significantly affects brand credibility.*

2.3. Brand Love

Researchers describe brand love as "a new marketing construct that helps explain and predict variation in desirable post-consumption behavior among satisfied consumers" [26] (p. 79). Brand love was an attempt to deepen the understanding of consumer behavior beyond satisfaction or from the like–dislike notion [25,26]. Good brands should have the ability to not only create desire or preference but to make customers loyal beyond reason. Researchers found brand love to be related

to post-consumption behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, willingness to pay a price premium and forgiveness in brand failures, among other outcomes [24–26]. Brand love is found to play a crucial role in products that offer more hedonic benefits than utilitarian [25]. There has long been an acceptance that luxury segments of any industry tend to create more hedonic benefits to consumers [39].

Interestingly, the concept of consumer "love" to a brand has gained some attention among the academic community, though it has yet to be fully explored. This offers the opportunity to examine new roles of brand love. Pertaining to the luxury restaurant context, a previous study found that consumers' love is stronger for brands offering more hedonic products and services versus those offering more utilitarian value [26]. In the study model of this present research, brand love's role was built on the results of empirical studies [24,40]. They found brand trust to significantly affect brand love. Trustworthiness is a fundamental foundation of brand credibility that is found to affect customer loyalty and perceived value based on previous research [41]. Further, researchers synthesized that positive experience is a crucial prerequisite of brand love [40,42]. Nevertheless, the effect of brand credibility or trust on an emotional construct has not been well established. Therefore, in this study, brand credibility is hypothesized to affect brand love. Hence, the proposal of Hypothesis 2 is as follows.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Brand credibility significantly affects brand love.*

2.4. Revisit Intention and Willingness to Pay a Premium

Revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium have long been considered crucial indicators of post-purchase customers' loyal behaviors [43–46]. Revisit intention is described as a state of likelihood to revisit a particular company or service provider [43]. A price premium has been defined differently by researchers in different disciplines. In the economic context, a price premium refers to prices that firms change to produce above-average profits [6]. In this vein, luxury products and services that often command higher than average prices relative to non-luxury products and services would always be considered as charging premium prices.

On the other hand, marketing researchers adopted a different approach to the notion of a price premium. The marketing approach acknowledges the various quality tiers of products by comparing the customers' perception of price against comparable alternatives [47]. Willingness to pay a premium is then defined for this present research as customers being prepared to pay more for services offered by a brand than for comparable alternative services provided by another brand [48].

The drivers of both revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium have been validated in many research contexts [6,14,40,49]. However, brand love has not been widely studied as the direct predictor of revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium, especially in the luxury restaurant context. Brand credibility or brand trust were found to impact brand loyalty intentions in various research contexts [6,46]. Brand love was also found to be a mediator between positive experiences and loyal behaviors in the tourism context [40]. Another piece of research further illustrated a strong correlation between brand love and the propensity to pay a higher price for the brand through a sample of 1,505 French consumers on their favorite brands [24]. Therefore, in this study, brand love was hypothesized to have a significant effect on revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Brand love significantly affects revisit intention.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Brand love significantly affects willingness to pay a premium.*

2.5. Trust and Reputation of Michelin Guide

Although the Michelin restaurant guide has established itself as the de facto source of information regarding fine dining options, only a small number of studies attempt to incorporate the trust of such guides into a study framework of consumer behavior. In essence, the construct of trust in the Michelin

guide is relatively straightforward: it intends to measure the level of belief that the information and recommendation provided on the guide are of high standards. Therefore, for future reference, the reader can fully rest against the advice given by the guide [27,28]. Subsequently, the trust then influences the reputation of the Michelin guide, which has been defined as a long-term and holistic perception of quality a customer forms towards a brand name [50,51]. The Michelin company often emphasized the operationalization process in producing its content to evaluate restaurant establishments free from any commercial bias. The company also explained that it works in close collaboration with the industry to keep its evaluation criteria up-to-date and relevant with the aim to best serve its readers [10].

The relationship between brand credibility and trust in the guide stems from the results of studies suggesting that brand credibility comes from the ability of the firm to perform and generate confidence that they can deliver again in the future [38,52]. Positive evaluation of service quality was found to be directly influencing trust in a business-to-business relationship [53]. Next, another study validated the indirect relationship between service quality and reputation in an online context [54]. The present study also proposes that brand love mediates the relationships between brand credibility and trust in the Michelin guide to the reputation of the Michelin guide as the hypotheses below state. Figure 1 illustrates all the study variables and the relationships between one another.

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Brand credibility significantly affects trust in Michelin guide.*

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *Trust in Michelin guide significantly affects brand love.*

Hypothesis 7 (H7). *Trust in Michelin guide significantly affects reputation of Michelin guide.*

Hypothesis 8 (H8). *Brand love significantly affects reputation of Michelin guide.*
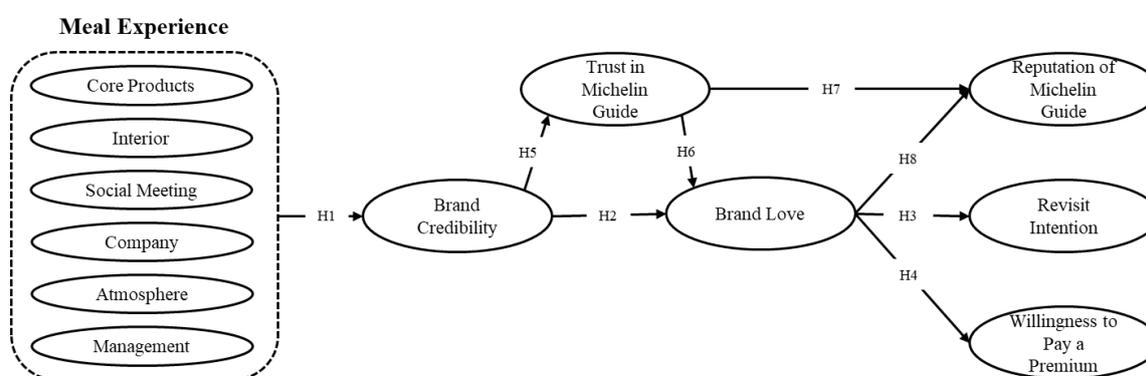
Figure 1. The proposed study model.

3. Methods

3.1. Measurement Items

All the measurement items used in the study have been adopted from previous studies. Then, these items were adapted to fit the context of this present research. The meal experience scale was developed and proposed by Hansen (2014) [19]. The scale comprises a total of 28 items in six factors. The first factor is the "core product" and consists of five items. The second dimension, "restaurant interior", consists of four items. The next factor is termed "personal social meeting" and it is measured using eight items. Next, factor four is termed "company" and consists of three items. The fifth dimension of the meal experience scale is named "restaurant atmosphere" and it is measured using two items. The last factor is a six-item dimension called "management control system". Another variable is "brand credibility", which consists of six items that were adopted from Baek et al. (2010) [16]. This study then adopted Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) nine-item scale to measure brand love [26]. Revisit intention

and willingness to pay a premium consists of three items each and was adapted from Casidy and Wymer (2016) and Sahin et al. (2011) [46,48]. Trust and reputation of the Michelin guide contain three and four items, respectively, and were adopted from the study by Sanchez Torres and Arroyo-Canada (2017) [54]. A complete list of all measurement items can be found in Appendix A, Table A1. All measurement items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

3.2. Survey Development and Data Collection

A filter question, "Have you visited a Michelin-starred restaurant in the last six months?" was included to ensure the survey participants had indeed dined at a Michelin-starred restaurant. It was suggested that most people can still accurately recall the experience and their opinions within the last six months [55]. Upon completion of the questionnaire, industry experts, graduate students in Hospitality and Tourism Management, and senior academics subjected it to a pre-test. Their feedback and suggestions were taken into account when finalizing the survey. The survey questionnaire was developed in English, and the translation into Korean was done using a professional translation company. The translator is a bilingual speaker of both English and Korean. After the translation had been completed, a second pre-test was conducted using the Korean version of the questionnaire by a separate group of experts. Minor adjustments to both the English and Korean versions were made according to their comments and recommendations.

Data collection was done by an online research agency. The company and its representatives were briefed on the details of this study, and once the process and target output were agreed upon, the final version of the survey questionnaire was input into their online collection platform. Invitation emails were sent to members of the research agency's panel members. The panel of approximately 10,000 members includes consumers of various backgrounds across South Korea. In the invitation email, a brief research context was provided along with two qualifying questions. The first qualifying question was "have you visited a Michelin-starred restaurant in the last six months?" Then, the participants were asked to choose the name of the Michelin-starred restaurant they last visited. This second step was designed to ensure the restaurant they had visited was indeed part of the Michelin restaurant guide. Those who passed the qualifying questions proceeded to complete the survey. The collection period lasted approximately two weeks. A total of 400 responses were collected. Due to the research setting requirement and method used to gather data, the sampling is considered to be a "nonprobability-purposive sampling" method [56].

3.3. Data Screening and Analysis Techniques

The raw data was screened for potential irregularities. Due to the nature of the online data collection, all cases were entirely filled by the respondents. Standard deviation was calculated for all cases, and four responses had zero deviation and were removed on the grounds of disengagement [57]. Skewness was calculated for each of the latent variables and the skewness values range between −0.631 and −0.124, all below the maximum recommended threshold of the absolute value of 1 [56]. Kurtosis values were then computed. All were below the recommended threshold of three, ranging from −0.504 and 1.109 [56]. Examination of linearity and homoscedasticity showed no violations, thus, indicating that the data showed evidence of multivariate normality. As a result, 398 cases were retained for further analysis. The software IBM SPSS and AMOS version 23 were used to conduct the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and path analysis using the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis technique following the recommended two-step approach [58].

3.4. Sample Profiles

The gender distribution among the survey participants is relatively equal, males are 57.1% of the sample, and 42.9% are female. The mean age is 40.09. Given the higher price tier of the Michelin-starred restaurants, the reported annual income was, relatively, on the higher side when compared to the

nation's average. The largest group, representing 22.2% of the sample, reported earnings between 40 million and 54.9 million Korean Won annually. Given the higher income level of participants that took part in the survey, the majority of participants reported having earned advanced degrees. Master's degree holders accounted for over half at 57.1%. The next largest group has earned a bachelor's degree with 20.2%. An overwhelmingly large percentage (70.2%) are full-time employees, followed by full-time self-employed professionals (13.4%). Regarding dining characteristics, the majority were not first-time customers. Those who reported the latest visit to be between their second to fourth time accounted for over 59.3%. On the other hand, only 28% visited the restaurant for the first time. More than half of the respondents visit Michelin-starred restaurants no more than twice a year. Family and relatives are found to be the accompanying persons to their latest visit to the restaurant at 43.2%. Not surprisingly, a very limited number of respondents (7) visited the restaurant alone. Table 1 summarized the descriptive statistics of the respondent profiles.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Variable	Category	Distribution	Valid Percentage
Gender	Male	226	57.1
	Female	170	42.9
Age	Mean	40.09	
Household income (KRW, million)	Under 24.9	30	7.6
	25–39.9	72	18.2
	40–54.9	88	22.2
	55–69.9	78	19.7
	70–84.9	64	16.2
	85–99.9	32	8.1
	Over 100	32	8.1
Educational Background	High school or below	36	9.1
	Bachelor's degree	80	20.2
	Master's degree	226	57.1
	Doctorate	46	11.6
	Others	8	2.0
Occupation type	Full-time employment	278	70.2
	Full-time self-employed	53	13.4
	Part time employment	12	3.0
	Unemployed	11	2.8
	Student	15	3.8
	Retired	4	1.0
	Stay-at-home mother/father	23	8.5
Visit companionship	Alone	7	1.8
	Family/relatives	171	43.2
	Friends	99	25.0
	Partner	85	21.5
	Business Colleague(s)	34	8.6
Prior visit(s) frequency to the same restaurant	First time	111	28.0
	2–4 time	235	59.3
	5–10 times	42	10.6
	More than 10 times	8	2.0
Frequency of visiting Michelin-starred restaurants	1 time or less a year	126	31.8
	1–2 times a year	165	41.7
	3–5 times a year	84	21.2
	6–10 times a year	12	3.0
	More than 10 times a year	9	2.3

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The goodness-of-fit statistics of the measurement model suggest a good model fit (χ^2 = 2884.051, df = 1343, $p < 0.001$, χ^2/df = 2.147, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.900, IFI = 0.901). Next, reliability or internal consistency was examined. The composite reliability (CR) value is an indication of reliability, which should exceed 0.70 [59]. In Table 2, the CR values of all variables range from 0.809 to 0.981. Therefore, the evidence of reliability exists. The next step is to investigate convergence validity. The AVE value is 0.896 as the highest and 0.535 as the lowest score, yet all exceed the minimum recommended amount of 0.50 [60]. Next, if the AVE is greater than the squared correlation values, evidence of discriminant validity exists [56]. According to our results displayed in Table 2, discriminant validity generally exists. However, a number of constructs share a higher than expected variance with others. Therefore, further assessment was required by combining the two highly correlated constructs together. Then χ^2 difference tests were performed to compare the combined and uncombined models. Discriminant validity can be established if both models were significantly different. The χ^2 difference between brand credibility combined with brand love, revisit intention, and reputation of the Michelin guide produced χ^2 difference results of 72.145 ($p < 0.001$), 132.509 ($p < 0.001$), and 398.882 ($p < 0.001$) respectively. Brand love, combined with revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium produced χ^2 difference results of 36.659 ($p < 0.001$), and 111.784 ($p < 0.001$). The χ^2 difference results from revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium were 46.878 ($p < 0.001$), willingness to pay a premium and trust was 286.367 ($p < 0.001$), and lastly trust and reputation were 22.756 ($p < 0.001$). All tested combined constructs demonstrated evidence of discriminant validity.

Table 2. Summary of confirmatory factor analysis results.

	ME	CRE	LOVE	REV	PREM	TRUST	REPU
ME	0.981 [a]						
CRE	0.932 [b] (0.869) [c]	0.885					
LOVE	0.894 (0.799)	0.956 (0.914)	0.890				
REV	0.821 (0.674)	0.851 (0.724)	0.929 (0.863)	0.809			
PREM	0.667 (0.445)	0.718 (0.515)	0.883 (0.780)	0.913 (0.834)	0.817		
TRUST	0.636 (0.404)	0.691 (0.477)	0.708 (0.501)	0.715 (0.511)	0.790 (0.624)	0.860	
REPU	0.695 (0.483)	0.754 (0.568)	0.726 (0.527)	0.738 (0.545)	0.649 (0.421)	0.957 (0.916)	0.855
AVE	**0.896**	**0.562**	**0.535**	**0.587**	**0.589**	**0.671**	**0.596**

Note: (1) Goodness-of-fit statistics: χ^2 = 2884.051, *df* = 1343, *p* < 0.001, χ^2/*df* = 2.147, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.900, IFI = 0.901. (2) Meal experience (ME), brand credibility (CRE), brand love (LOVE), revisit intention (REV), willingness to pay a premium (PREM), trust in Michelin guide (TRUST), reputation of Michelin guide (REPU); [a] = composite reliabilities are along the diagonal; [b] = correlations; [c] = squared correlations are in parentheses.

4.2. Structural Equation Modeling

The goodness-of-fit statistics of the structural model also show a satisfactory fit between the data and the proposed model (χ^2 = 2980.565, *df* = 1356, χ^2/*df* = 2.198, RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.895, IFI = 0.885, TLI = 0.889, NFI = 0.823, PGFI = 0.706). Table 3 contains the detailed results of the SEM analysis. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical model with hypothesis testing results. The proposed model has been more than adequately explained by the total variance. The three dependent variables—revisit intention, willingness to pay a premium, and reputation—are explained by 89.6%, 74.2%, and 92.8% of the total variance, respectively. Furthermore, the total impact assessment on the dependent variables

shows brand love to have the largest total impact on revisit intention (0.909) and willingness to pay a premium (0.862). On the other hand, trust has the largest total impact on the reputation of the Michelin guide (0.893).
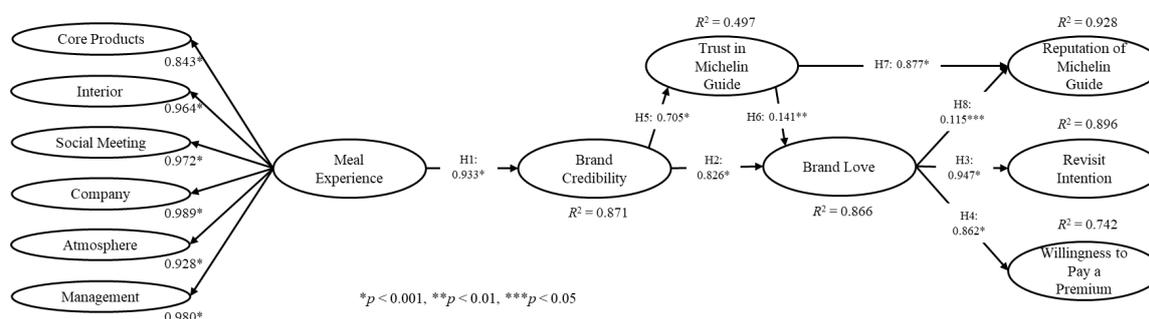
Table 3. Summary of the structural equation modeling results.

			Standardized Estimate	*t*-Value
Meal experience	→	Core product	0.843 *	
Meal experience	→	Restaurant interior	0.964 *	
Meal experience	→	Personal social meeting	0.972 *	
Meal experience	→	Company	0.989 *	
Meal experience	→	Restaurant atmosphere	0.928 *	
Meal experience	→	Management control system	0.980 *	
H1: Meal experience	→	Brand credibility	0.933	13.275 *
H2: Brand credibility	→	Brand love	0.826	12.570 *
H3: Brand love	→	Revisit intention	0.947	14.921 *
H4: Brand love	→	Willingness to pay a premium	0.862	14.318 *
H5: Brand credibility	→	Trust in Michelin guide	0.705	12.229 *
H6: Trust in Michelin guide	→	Brand love	0.141	3.228 **
H7: Trust in Michelin guide	→	Reputation of Michelin guide	0.877	12.509 *
H8: Brand love	→	Reputation of Michelin guide	0.115	2.164 ***

Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 2980.565$, $df = 1356$, $\chi^2/df = 2.198$, RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.895, IFI = 0.885, TLI = 0.889, NFI = 0.823, PGFI = 0.706　$* p < 0.001$, $** p < 0.01$, $*** p < 0.05$	Total variance explained: R^2 of CRE = 0.871　R^2 of LOVE = 0.866　R^2 of REV = 0.896　R^2 of PREM = 0.742　R^2 of TRUST = 0.497　R^2 of REPU = 0.928	Total impact on REV, PREM, and REPU: TRUST = 0.134, 0.122, 0.893　LOVE = 0.947, 0.862, 0.115　CRE = 0.876, 0.797, 0.724　ME = 0.818, 0.744, 0.676

Note: meal experience (ME), brand credibility (CRE), brand love (LOVE), revisit intention (REV), willingness to pay a premium (PREM), trust in Michelin guide (TRUST), reputation of Michelin guide (REPU).

Figure 2. Study model and the results of structural equation modeling.

Hypothesis 1 refers to the relationship between meal experience and brand credibility with a standardized estimate value of 0.933 and is significant at the 0.001 level. With Hypothesis 2, the hypothesized path from brand credibility to brand love is also supported ($\beta = 0.826$, $p < .001$). The data also support Hypotheses 3 and 4; brand love positively and significantly predicted revisit intention ($\beta = 0.896$, $p < 0.001$) and willingness to pay a premium ($\beta = 0.862$, $p < 0.001$). The relationship between brand credibility and trust in the Michelin guide is also significant ($\beta = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, Hypothesis 5 is supported. Trust in the Michelin guide also positively and significantly affected brand love ($\beta = 0.141$, $p < 0.01$) and the reputation of the Michelin guide ($\beta = 0.877$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, the reputation of the Michelin guide is predicted by brand love ($\beta = 0.115$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, all proposed hypotheses have been supported by the data. A summary of the SEM results can be found in Table 3 and Figure 2 illustrates the study model with the SEM results.

4.3. Indirect Impact Assessment

The indirect impacts assessment was performed to examine the mediation effect among the study variables. Bootstrapping was performed with 2000 samples at 95 percent confidence level. Meal experience has all positive and significant indirect effects on trust in the Michelin guide ($\beta = 0.698$,

$p < 0.01$), brand love ($\beta = 0.864$, $p < 0.01$), revisit intention ($\beta = 0.818$, $p < 0.01$), willingness to pay a premium ($\beta = 0.744$, $p < 0.01$), and reputation of the Michelin guide ($\beta = 0.676$, $p < 0.01$). Brand credibility produced a positive and significant indirect link to revisit intention ($\beta = 0.876$, $p < 0.01$), willingness to pay a premium ($\beta = 0.797$, $p < 0.01$), and the reputation of the Michelin guide ($\beta = 0.724$, $p < 0.01$). However, the relationship between brand credibility and brand love was fully mediated by trust in the Michelin guide. Furthermore, trust did not produce any significant indirect impact on revisit intention, willingness to pay a premium, and the reputation of the Michelin guide, thus implying that brand love is a complete mediator. Table 4 displays the results of the indirect impact assessment.

Table 4. Indirect impact assessment results.

Indirect Effect of	On				
	TRUST	**LOVE**	**REV**	**PREM**	**REPU**
ME	0.658 *	0.864 *	0.818 *	0.744 *	0.676 *
CRE	-	0.100	0.876 *	0.797 *	0.724 *
TRUST	-	-	0.134	0.122	0.016

Note: meal experience (ME), brand credibility (CRE), brand love (LOVE), revisit intention (REV), willingness to pay a premium (PREM), trust in Michelin guide (TRUST), reputation of Michelin guide (REPU). * $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion

5.1. General Discussion

Although the meal experience scale has not been empirically tested, in the context of Michelin-starred restaurants, all items have shown robustness and effective predictive ability. All six dimensions converged strongly, implying that its focus on the restaurant's core products and other restaurant-specific service elements could be a useful scale to measure restaurant performance. The finding is also consistent with the literature on experiential marketing, in that consumers do not necessarily pursue only functional value but also fantasies, feelings and fun [61,62]. Additionally, customers do not only judge the meal experience based on the food and beverage alone but also all aspects of their interactions with the restaurant and their staff. Hence, the meal experience scale, which includes other elements of service performance during the entire meal, adequately measured the comprehensive experiential service provided by luxury restaurants. However, given that this was the first attempt to validate the scale, the results should be viewed with caution. The scale's validity and reliability need to be tested in a broader range of restaurant contexts to establish its application in research comprehensively.

Consistent with previous research, the meal experience dimensions are found to directly cause brand credibility. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies [38,52], that credibility or trust is a result of past positive experiences. In the luxury service context, this finding adds further support to other studies [1,22] on the linkage between service quality and brand credibility. Subsequently, brand credibility was found to be a direct antecedent of brand love. These findings were consistent with the results of previous studies that credibility serves as a foundation of brand love [24,40,42]. The results imply that credibility does not only serve as an essential antecedent cognitively, but also emotionally. Though brand love is defined to be a state of mind that customers stay loyal to a brand beyond reason, positive evaluation and the trust that brand can always deliver is proven to be a reason for love. The effect of brand love on revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium supported the findings of previous research results that, among luxury brands' patrons, purchase intention and loyal intentions can be heavily subjective and hedonically driven [43]. Furthermore, the notion that consumers do not only make rational choices but also emotional ones regarding consumption decisions emerged in previous research that also found that luxury restaurant patrons tend not to look only for the functional quality of the meal but the entire experiential quality [8,63].

This brings the discussion to the Michelin guide. The finding is consistent with previous studies [38,52,54] that trust is a result of past experience. It can also be interpreted that the Michelin restaurant guide can be considered an informational influence, and if one follows the guide and finds the recommendation to be satisfactory, trust in the guide would naturally form. Then, trust helps form a positive reputation. Reputation can be considered crucial to the success of such a guide due to how customers must commit to dining at the restaurants before the actual consumption. Therefore, any dissatisfaction could be directly blamed on the recommender. The reputation of the Michelin guide received the largest variance explained compared to the other two independent variables, which could also indicate the significant role it plays in future decisions. The results could imply that either variety-seeking behaviors or decision risks may play a more significant role among luxury than non-luxury services.

5.2. Implications

There are many implications that managers and owners of restaurants can take away from this study. For managers and owners of restaurants, this should be encouraging in that meal experience, brand credibility, and brand love are all predictors of revisit intention and willingness to pay a premium. In other words, if the restaurant can offer a high-quality meal experience and ensures customers that they can and are willing to deliver the same standards of service in the future, they can expect customers' loyalty intention in response. Thus, it is important to emphasize to restaurant industry practitioners that the functional quality of the meal alone is not necessarily sufficient to generate a high-quality meal experience. As the meal experience scale suggests, a high-quality meal experience requires a high level of technical quality from both the chefs and the service staff. Specifically, the six dimensions of the meal experience scale indicate that core products remain an integral part of luxury restaurants. Nevertheless, the staff's awareness of the occasion of the meal, personal social meetings, accompanying guests, restaurant atmosphere, and management control systems are all indicators of the service staff's technical quality.

The findings highlight that the quality of chefs and kitchen staff must be one of the priorities for any successful luxury restaurant. Apart from the need for restaurants at the highest market segment to consistently innovate and uphold their food standards, it would be equally beneficial to train service staff to start noticing or even asking for the occasion of the meal. Then, the restaurant can augment the significance of the occasions by offering customized services leading to a comprehensive engineered customer experience. For example, complimentary desserts or snacks congratulating anniversaries, or small birthday souvenirs may help illustrate the willingness of the restaurant to offer customized services to the guests. Moreover, quality service can help build the long-term reputation of the Michelin guide, in which any luxury restaurants always need to make sure they are included in every new version. Then, the reputational factor can be used as an important cue to form customers' perceptions of quality. The perception of quality can be utilized as a powerful marketing tool to attract new customers.

Theoretically, this study made a contribution in many areas. The study adopted an exciting new service quality scale that was recently developed and introduced but had yet to be empirically tested. The validation of the scale with this study is, thus, not an in-depth exploration and validation of the scale—it is the first to put the scale into testing. This study also introduces relatively new paths together with some of the more established concepts. The hierarchical flow between service quality, brand credibility and brand love is confirmed with the results of this study. The role of a trustable and reputable information source such as the Michelin restaurant guide should not also be overlooked by the academic community. A successful restaurant business may not necessarily rely on external contributions such as a restaurant guide to generate loyal customers but, as the results suggest, they can certainly help in the long-term.

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations

This study is not free from limitations. Like other studies, this study could only capture a limited number of overall client profiles. As a result, the generalizability of this study cannot be considered fully representative. From the perspective of the meal experience scale, it usually required multiple tries in various contexts to confirm its validity fully, thus leading to an opportunity for future research projects to adopt this framework into their studies. This present project is of the opinion that the meal experience dimensions are suitable in the luxury restaurant context. Nevertheless, it should not deter future studies from applying the scale in respect to other contexts besides that of only luxury restaurants. The impact of restaurant performance and the Michelin guide could also be further explored in future research, as luxury consumption can differ from non-luxury products. Moreover, the role of reputation can benefit from further exploration in future research projects. Specifically, from the restaurant's perspective, these projects could entail comparative studies between the impact of a restaurant guide's reputation and other marketing tools (such as sales promotions) on sales and guest retention.

6. Conclusions

This present research aims to provide empirical evidence supporting the influencing factors of luxury restaurant customers' loyalty. The study adopts the Michelin restaurant guide as a basis to identify luxury restaurants and their diners. Based on the literature review process, a variety of constructs were determined, namely the meal experience scale, brand credibility, and brand love. These constructs were hypothesized to predict customer loyalty intentions—specifically, revisit intention and their willingness to pay a premium. Moreover, the previous literature also raised the question of how the individual restaurants in the Michelin guide could contribute to the reputation of the guide. Thus, two more constructs were added to the study model. The effective sample size of 398 previous diners at a Michelin restaurant helped to confirm all the hypotheses. The findings underlined a few key implications. First, the restaurant performance is comprised of both food and service elements. Hence, the total customer experience includes more than just the functional quality. Secondly, the continuous training and innovation of both the chefs and service personnel are essential strategies for restaurant managers. Thirdly, the experiential quality can help build the reputation, which, in turn, can signal the perception of quality for prospective customers.

Appendix A

Table A1. Measurement items and standardized factor loading.

Meal experience—Core product
This restaurant has a menu that is easily readable. (0.680)
This restaurant has a visually attractive menu that reflects the restaurant's image. (0.769)
This restaurant has courses that give excellent taste experiences. (0.732)
This restaurant delivers dishes that are in accordance with the menu and description given from the staff. (0.790)
This restaurant has dishes that reflect the concept. (0.784)
Meal experience—Restaurant interior
This restaurant's dining area is comfortable and easy to move around in. (0.768)
This restaurant's restrooms are thoroughly clean. (0.735)
This restaurant uses colors, furnishing, art, and cutlery to give a complete impression. (0.741)
This restaurant's physical facilities, such as buildings, signs, décor, lighting, and carpeting, are visually appealing. (0.754)

Table A1. *Cont.*

Meal experience—Restaurant social meeting
The staff at this restaurant quickly corrects anything that is wrong. (0.780)
The staff at this restaurant provides prompt and quick service. (0.753)
The staff at this restaurant makes you feel special. (0.749)
This restaurant has employees who are polite and show courtesy toward other staff members. (0.729)
This restaurant has an excellent reputation for providing its service at the time it promises to do so (e.g., drink or food is served at the time promised). (0.735)
This restaurant has an excellent reputation for insisting on error-free service (e.g., drinks and food are given correctly, no mistakes appear on patron's bill). (0.744)
This restaurant has staff who are always willing to help patrons (e.g., willing to hang up their coats, call them a taxi, or help take photographs). (0.695)
This restaurant's employees can answer your questions completely. (0.704)

Meal experience—Company
This restaurant's employees make the entire company feel taken care of. (0.752)
This restaurant is aware of the occasion for the meal. (0.650)
This restaurant's personal communicate with the entire company. (0.724)

Meal experience—Restaurant atmosphere
This restaurant has the ability to stimulate all senses. (0.800)
This restaurant atmosphere has the ability to make you feel special. (0.753)

Meal experience—Management control system
This restaurant's personnel who well-trained, competent, and experienced. (0.721)
This restaurant seems to give employees support so that they can do their job well. (0.707)
This restaurant seems to have the customer's best interest at heart. (0.760)
This restaurant has an optimal order of serving food for customers. (0.756)
This restaurant is dependable. (0.774)
Customers can trust employees at this restaurant. (0.780)

Brand credibility
This restaurant brand delivers (or would deliver) what it promises. (0.745)
Service claims from this restaurant brand are believable. (0.745)
Overtime, my experiences with this restaurant brand led me to expect it to keep its promises. (0.784)
This restaurant brand is committed to delivering on its claims. (0.746)
This restaurant brand has a name you can trust. (0.745)
This restaurant brand has the ability to deliver what it promises. (0.732)

Brand love
This is a wonderful restaurant brand. (0.764)
This restaurant brand makes me feel good. (0.741)
This restaurant brand is totally awesome. (0.731)
I have neutral feelings about this restaurant brand. (removed due to low loading, <0.5)
This restaurant brand makes me very happy. (0.703)
I love this restaurant brand! (0.736)
I have no particular feelings about this restaurant brand. (removed due to low loading, <0.5)
This restaurant brand is a pure delight. (0.716)
I am passionate about this restaurant brand. (0.728)

Trust in Michelin guide
I trust the restaurant rated by the Michelin guide. (0.828)
I trust the promises and assurances given by the Michelin guide. (0.821)
The Michelin guide gives me confidence to visit luxury restaurants. (0.809)

Reputation of Michelin guide
I believe that the Michelin guide has great recognition and prestige. (0.780)
I think the Michelin guide has a "good name". (0.709)
I believe that the Michelin guide has a good reputation. (0.787)
I think the Michelin guide is one of the most important in fine dining. (0.808)

Revisit intention
I intend to visit this restaurant brand in the near future. (0.760)
The next time I need this kind of service, I will visit the same restaurant brand. (0.714)
I will continue to be loyal customer for this restaurant brand. (0.820)

Willingness to pay a premium
I am willing to pay a premium over competing services to be able to visit this restaurant brand again. (0.802)
I am willing to pay a lot more to dine at this restaurant brand than dining at other restaurant brands. (0.760)
I am willing to pay a higher price for this restaurant brand than for other restaurant brands. (0.758)

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